

FEBRUARY 2011

# Asimov's SCIENCE FICTION®

## The Choice

Paul McAuley

Bill Pronzini &  
Barry N. Malzberg  
Aliette de Bodard  
Jeff Carlson  
Sara Genge

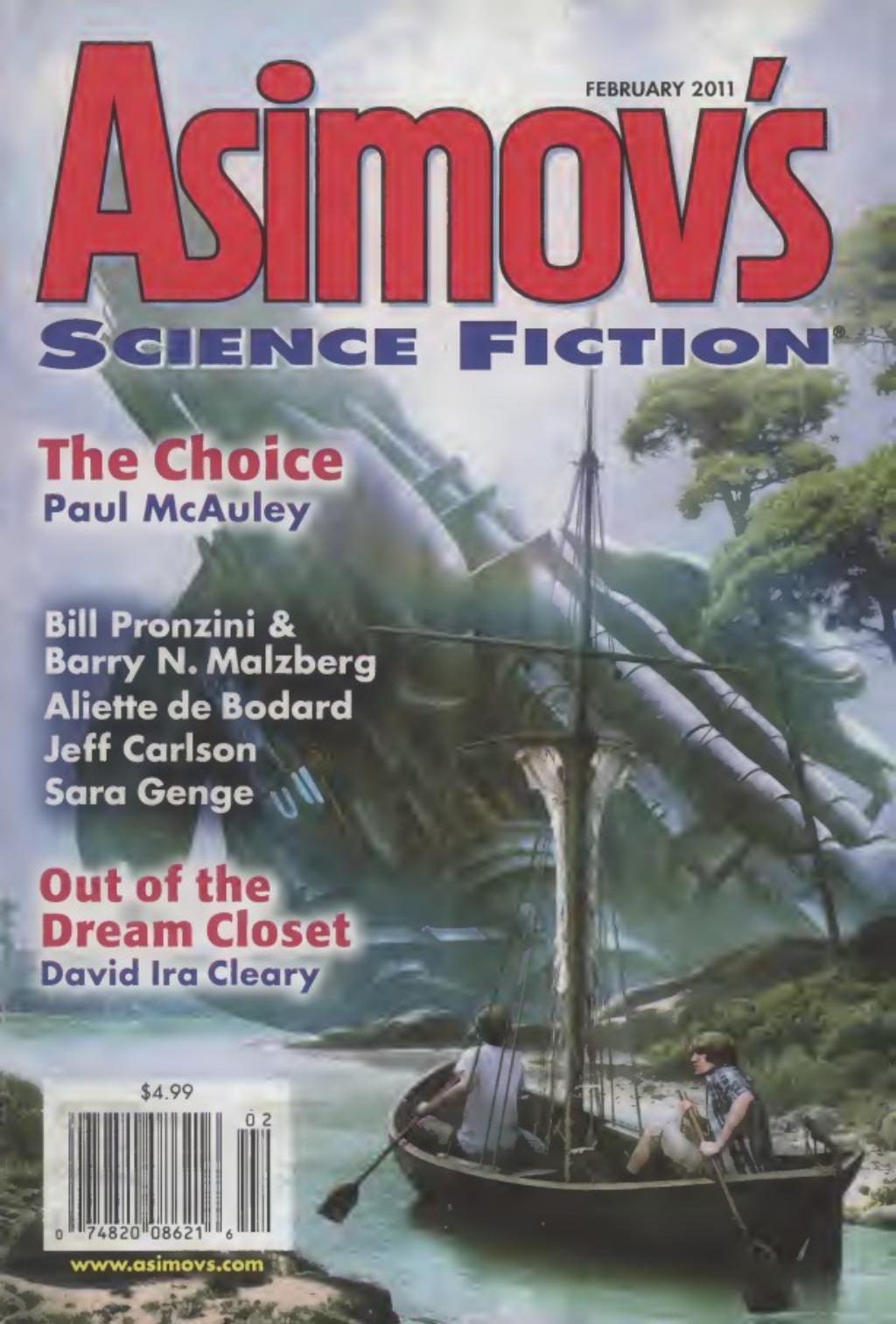
## Out of the Dream Closet

David Ira Cleary

\$4.99



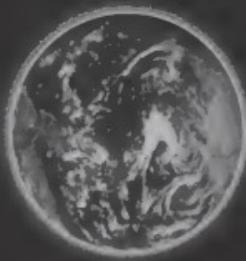
[www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com)



# Explore the Universe!

Visit [www.analogsf.com](http://www.analogsf.com)  
&  
[www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com)

**Home of the world's leading  
Science Fiction magazines**



**Log on and enjoy:**

- ★ Award-nominated stories from the genre's leading authors
- ★ Readers' Forum
- ★ Excerpts of current stories
- ★ SF news and events
- ★ Book reviews

**ANALOG**  
SCIENCE FICTION AND FACT  
[www.analogsf.com](http://www.analogsf.com)

**Asimov's**  
SCIENCE FICTION  
[www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com)

# TOUR THE UNIVERSE WITH THE ANALOG SCIENCE FICTION AND FACT VALUE PACK!



**SAVE  
70%!**

Order today and enjoy an unbeatable combination of stimulating fiction stories, provocative editorials, and fascinating articles, all solidly rooted in science-fact.

You'll get five of our most popular back issues for just \$6.95 plus shipping and handling. That's a savings of 70% off the regular price!

To order, just fill out the coupon below and mail with your payment today

## DELL MAGAZINES

Suite SM-100, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220

**YES!** Please send me my Analog Science Fiction Value Pack. I get 5 back issues for just \$6.95 plus \$2 shipping and handling (\$8.95 per pack, U.S. funds). My satisfaction is fully guaranteed! My payment of \$ \_\_\_\_\_ is enclosed. (APFK05)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
(Please print)

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_

State: \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP: \_\_\_\_\_

Offers can be delivered within the U.S.A. only. Please make checks payable to Dell Magazines Direct. Allow 8 weeks for delivery. Magazines are back issues shipped together in one package. To keep prices low we cannot make custom orders. Offer expires 12/31/11.

60L-NANVL1

# Asimov's SCIENCE FICTION

FEBRUARY 2011

Vol. 35 No. 2 (Whole Number 421)

Next Issue on Sale January 25, 2011

Cover Art by Paul Youll

for "The Choice"

## NOVELLA

- 80 THE CHOICE ..... PAUL McAULEY

## NOVELETTE

- 10 OUT OF THE DREAM CLOSET ..... DAVID IRA CLEARY

## SHORT STORIES

- 35 WASTER MERCY ..... SARA GENGE  
42 PLANET OF THE SEALIES ..... JEFF CARLSON  
50 SHIPBIRTH ..... ALIETTE DE BODARD  
62 BROTHER SLEEP ..... TIM McDANIEL  
74 EVE OF BEYOND ..... BILL PRONZINI & BARRY N. MALZBERG

## POETRY

- 34 ENTANGLEMENT, VALENTINES  
AND EINSTEIN ..... W. GREGORY STEWART  
61 FLICKER ..... UNCLE RIVER  
79 TOWER ..... JANE YOLEN

## DEPARTMENTS

- 4 EDITORIAL: ¡AY, CARAMBA! ..... SHEILA WILLIAMS  
6 REFLECTIONS: A RELIC OF ANTIQUITY ..... ROBERT SILVERBERG  
9 2010 HUGO CONGRATULATIONS .....  
73 NEXT ISSUE .....  
107 ON BOOKS ..... PETER HECK  
112 THE SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR ..... ERWIN S. STRAUSS

Asimov's Science Fiction. ISSN 1065-2698. Vol. 35, No. 2. Whole No. 421, February 2011. GST #R123293128. Published monthly except for two combined double issues in April/May and October/November by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. One year subscription \$55.90 in the United States and U.S. possessions. In all other countries \$65.90 (GST included in Canada), payable in advance in U.S. funds. Address for subscription and all other correspondence about them, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Address for all editorial matters: Asimov's Science Fiction, 267 Broadway, 4th Floor, New York, NY 10007. Asimov's Science Fiction is the registered trademark of Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. © 2010 by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. All rights reserved, printed in the U.S.A. Protection secured under the Universal and Pan American Copyright Conventions. Reproduction or use of editorial or pictorial content in any manner without express permission is prohibited. Please visit our website, [www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com), for information regarding electronic submissions. All manual submissions must include a self-addressed, stamped envelope; the publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. Periodical postage paid at Norwalk, CT and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER, send change of address to Asimov's Science Fiction, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. In Canada return to Workcolor St. Jean, 800 Blvd. Industrial, St. Jean, Quebec J3B 8G4.

Printed in CANADA



# FREE BONUS Book

With every elite Crosswords Club gift membership!



Use the coupon below to give a gift membership to The Crosswords Club or The Uptown Puzzle Club and you'll receive *The Crosswords Club Gold Edition* book FREE! A great gift for yourself... or to give along with your gift subscription!

---

*64 pages packed with  
some of our most  
entertaining puzzles ever!*

---

## Choose your Crosswords Club Gift:

- **The Crosswords Club** – Six original high-quality themed crosswords per month.
- **The Uptown Puzzle Club** – Five completely new crosswords per month from the best puzzle constructors in the country.

**Order TOLL-FREE: 1-800-433-4386 (8am-7pm, EST)**

Mail to: **The Crosswords Club • Dept. S, 6 Prowitt St. • Norwalk, CT 06855-1220**

**YES!** Enter a 1-year gift membership as indicated below and send me *The Crosswords Club Gold Edition* (XWCGR) for FREE!

**The Crosswords Club** (XWC)  
1 year/\$39.95

**The Uptown Puzzle Club** (UTC)  
1 year/\$35.00

Send to \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_

State \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

Your name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_

State \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

Offer expires December 31, 2011.

**60L-NZ3CL2**

Allow up to 4 weeks for delivery of first issue.  
Outside the USA: Canada and Mexico add  
\$10 per membership per year. All other foreign  
countries add \$25 per membership per year.

## ¡AY, CARAMBA!

While perusing the June 16, 2010, issue of *O Magazine* at the beauty parlor this summer, I discovered an interesting sidebar on "Four Books to Steal from Your Teenager." One surprising recommendation was *I, Robot*. Blogger and author of *Shelf Discovery: The Teen Classics We Never Stopped Reading*, Lizzie Skurnick, wrote "Don't laugh! If you think Asimov is meant only for thirteen-year-old boys obsessed with computer games, it's time to look at this classic collection of brilliantly plotted gems that anticipate not only our completely gadget-dependent world but also the philosophical implications of turning our lives over to smartphones."

This passage is intriguing because it indicates that a science fiction book first published over sixty years ago, and compiled from stories that had begun appearing in print ten years earlier, is still read by computer obsessed teens and their middle-aged mothers. It speaks not only to the longevity of the book, but to Isaac Asimov's far ranging impact.

That Isaac's book was essentially the genesis of Alan Parson's 1977 album, *I Robot*; to some extent the basis for the 2004 film *I, Robot*, starring Will Smith; and the inspiration for iRobot, the successful robotics firm founded in 1990 by Rodney Brooks, Colin Angle, and Helen Greiner, is immediately obvious. To be responsible to any degree for three such disparate entities is remarkable, but the book's influence on our society, our thinking, and even our language, goes much deeper.

From Helen Greiner to MIT's Marvin Minsky, researchers in artificial intelligence have been quick to acknowledge their debt to Isaac Asimov's fiction. Isaac, of course, never did the real work of the cognitive scientist or a software engineer. He didn't invent a positronic brain, de-

sign an operating system, or create a robotic vacuum cleaner. Instead, he influenced the daydreams of future scientists, engineers, composers, and screenwriters. Isaac's gift to us was to write entertaining stories about artificial intelligences that could assist, rather than terrify, humanity.

He wasn't the first to write such stories, just as he wasn't the first person to publish a work called "*I, Robot*." Credit for the title goes to the brothers Earl and Otto Binder who, writing as Eando Binder, published a confessional tale about a sadly misjudged robot, Adam Link, in the January 1939 issue of *Amazing Stories*. The Binders' title was almost certainly a riff on the "autobiography" of Tiberius Claudius Drusus Nero Germanicus—*I, Claudius*—which had come out in 1934. It was Isaac's publisher at Gnome Press who, in 1950, appended the name of Earl and Otto's tale to The Good Doctor's collection of nine robot short stories.

While Isaac admitted to being moved and inspired by the sympathetic Adam Link, it is his book and not the Binders' robot, nor even Robert Graves's famous best-seller, that has exerted a stunningly pervasive influence on the twenty-first century.

Isaac was incredibly pleased when the Oxford English Dictionary attributed the word "robotic," the back formation of "robot," to his 1941 short story, "Liar!" Some people say that anyone could have come up with that expression, but Isaac was the one who did. He told me that the OED had cited his fiction in two other instances, but that "robotic" was the only word that had become a part of our common parlance. He was quick to add that there wouldn't have been any back formation if Karel Capek hadn't introduced the original term in his 1920 play *R.U.R.*

It seems to me, though, that Isaac's predominant influence on our era has been in the use of I- and i-everything words. I know there was no mention of *I, Robot* or Isaac Asimov when the iMAC was introduced by Apple in 1998. In his introductory demo, Steve Jobs said the "i" represented the "excitement of the internet." Jobs also invoked the words "individual," "instruct," "inform," and "inspire." None of these terms is akin to the nominative singular pronoun, the ego, or the narrator of a literary work as "I" is variously defined in dictionaries. Yet I can't hear the "i" in the names of nascent bits of artificial intelligence like the iPad, iPod, iPhone, and iTouch, and not think of that legendary collection of short stories.

I doubt I'm the first person to write about this coincidence and perhaps the connection has already been disproven. I know that the "i" really is supposed to mean the "internet," because that's what all these little devices do, i.e., they connect to the internet. Seeing a correlation between *I, Robot* and an iPhone may simply be a product of the human mind's need to systematize information, but I'm sure I'm not the only person to make this association. It could even be hinted at in Lizzie Skurnick's remarks about "smartphones."

Indeed, some of the iPhone's competition appears to be toying with the concept. The tiny robot mascot representing Google's Android operating system could be playing off a tacit understanding that the term "iPhone" evokes a robotic intelligence. In some advertising, the Android is referred to as a "robot." If the Android is a robot, the iPhone must be one, too.

Culture continues to evolve. Some new concepts, like the TV show *iCarly*, the comic *iZombie*, or the notion of investing in iShares, seem to skip the Asimov connection and refer directly to Apple technology. Others, like Hasbro's robotic music-playing i-Dog and i-Turtle, may be referencing both. In any case, I, personally, am not sure these constructs would exist under such monikers if Isaac hadn't left an indelible impression on our imaginations first with *I, Robot*. O

# Asimov's

SCIENCE FICTION

SHEILA WILLIAMS

Editor

TREVOR QUACHRI

Managing Editor

MARY GRANT

Editorial Assistant

JACKIE SHERBOW

Editorial Administrative Assistant

VICTORIA GREEN

Senior Art Director

CINDY TIBERI

Production Artist

LAURA TULLEY

Senior Production Manager

JENNIFER CONE

Production Associate

ABIGAIL BROWNING

Manager Subsidiary Rights and Marketing

BRUCE W. SHERBOW

Senior Vice President, Sales and Marketing

SANDY MARLOWE

Circulation Services

## ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVE

ROBIN DIMEGLIO

Advertising Sales Manager

Tel: (203) 866-6688 ext.180 Fax: (203) 854-5962

printadvertising@dellmagazines.com

(Display and Classified Advertising)

PETER KANTER

Publisher

CHRISTINE BEGLEY

Vice President, Editorial and Product Development

SUSAN MANGAN

Vice President, Design and Production

ISAAC ASIMOV

Editorial Director (1977-1992)

Stories from *Asimov's* have won 51 Hugos and 27 Nebula Awards, and our editors have received 18 Hugo Awards for Best Editor.

Please do not send us your manuscript until you've gotten a copy of our guidelines. Look for them online at [www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com) or send us a self-addressed, stamped business-size (#10) envelope, and a note requesting this information. Write "manuscript guidelines" in the bottom left-hand corner of the outside envelope. We prefer electronic submissions, but the address for manual submissions and for all editorial correspondence is *Asimov's Science Fiction*, 267 Broadway, Fourth Floor, New York, NY 10007-2352. While we're always looking for new writers, please, in the interest of time-saving, find out what we're looking for, and how to prepare it, before submitting your story.

## A RELIC OF ANTIQUITY

When I first discovered science fiction magazines, more than sixty years ago, I rushed out and bought all the back issues of them I could find. That wasn't particularly difficult to do back then, because there was an abundance of second-hand bookshops in New York City, where I lived, and—though I didn't realize it—the ancient magazines that I hunted down weren't particularly ancient yet. The oldest of them, Hugo Gernsback's pioneering *Amazing Stories*, was all of twenty-three years old when I first began collecting the old magazines in 1949. And, as I wrote in these pages a few years ago in an essay called "Aladdin's Cave" (January 2008), I had the good fortune to stumble upon a veritable treasure trove of these old magazines in a Brooklyn antique shop and hauled home package after package of them until my files were complete.

I still have those old magazines, and now and again I pull some of them from the shelves and stare at them in wonder. They are true relics of antiquity, strange vestiges of science fiction's earliest years of magazine publishing, and they hold the same attraction for me that the gigantic fossil skeletons of dinosaurs in the museum did for me when I was a small boy.

Yesterday, for some reason, I got out my file of one of the strangest and least known of the early magazines—*Amazing Stories Quarterly*, which Hugo Gernsback founded in 1928 as a companion to his instantly popular monthly *Amazing Stories*, and which lasted twenty-two issues until the Depression finally did it in 1934. I have half a dozen of them on my desk right now. They are truly dinosaurian in every respect: ancient and huge and looking like nothing that walks the earth today.

*Amazing Stories* was printed in what is now called the "bedsheet" format—each page 8 by 11 inches in size, approximately the dimensions of a sheet of typing paper, or about twice the size of the pages of the magazine you are now reading. Those big pages were covered with a lot of small type, so that each 96-page issue contained well over a hundred thousand words of fiction. But the readers of Gernsback's new magazine were hungry for more and more of what was not yet called science fiction—Gernsback liked to use the compound word "scientification," and today's more familiar term did not establish itself until a few years later—and so in 1927 he issued an even larger experimental one-shot magazine, *Amazing Stories Annual*, with room in its 128 big pages for a complete Edgar Rice Burroughs novel, *The Master Mind of Mars*. The *Annual* quickly sold out its hundred thousand-copy printing, which led Gernsback to reinvent it as a quarterly six months later.

It was an imposing thing, that *Quarterly*. It contained 144 pages, making it ideal for running long novels in a single issue, and sold for a whopping fifty cents a copy—this at a time when automobiles cost about six hundred dollars and salaries of ten and fifteen dollars a week were pretty much the norm. How the generally impecunious young men who were the backbone of Gernsback's readership could manage to find the huge sum of half a dollar every three months for the magazine is beyond me. But plenty of them did, and the new jumbo gave them hours and hours of reading pleasure in every issue.

The novels Gernsback liked to publish in the *Quarterly* tended to be massive and slow-moving, strong on descriptive detail and weak on characterization and

dialog. Few of today's readers would be likely to sit still for J. Schlossl's "The Second Swarm" from the second issue, or Stanton A. Coblenz's ponderous satire, "The Sunken World," from the third, let alone Gernsback's own heavy-handed futuristic novel, "Ralph 124C1+" in number five. In fact, the most notable contribution to those early issues may have been a reader's letter that earned a fifty dollar prize. It came from a young writer named Jack Williamson, just setting out on the seventy-five-year-long career that would see him winning Hugos and Nebulas as late as the 1990s. "The chief function of scientifiction," the teenage Williamson wrote, "is the creation of real pictures of new things, new ideas, and new machines. Scientifiction is the product of the human imagination, guided by the suggestion of science. It takes the basis of science, considers all the clues that science has to offer, and then adds a thing alien to science—imagination. It goes ahead and lights the way. And when science sees the things made real in the author's mind, it makes them real indeed. It deals only with that which it can see, weigh, or measure; only with logical hypothesis, experiment and influence and calculation. Scientifiction begins with the ending of science."

Have there been many better definitions of science fiction offered since young Jack Williamson wrote that in 1928?

Gernsback's publishing company went bankrupt in 1929 and he lost control of

his magazines. (He bounced back quickly with a new string of them, including *Wonder Stories* and the corresponding *Wonder Stories Quarterly*.) *Amazing* and its quarterly companion emerged from bankruptcy in the hands of a company called Radio Science Publications—think of an era when *radio* was cutting edge high technology!—and then quickly passed to Teck Publishing Corporation. But throughout these corporate migrations there was little change in the appearance of the magazines and none in their editorial policies, because the new editor was the venerable T. O'Conor Sloane, who had been Gernsback's associate editor from the start.

Sloane (1851-1940) was, from all accounts, a highly conservative geezer, seventy-eight years old when he took over the editorial post, who privately believed that space travel was a fantasy, impossible to achieve. He was old-fashioned in his literary tastes and long-winded and pedantic in his editorial introductions to the stories, and he was so unhurried in deciding to buy material submitted to him that the writers of the day nicknamed him "T. Oh-come-on Slow-one." But there is a certain musty charm and grace to the Sloane magazines, and the *Quarterly* in particular published some of the best science fiction of its day.

I've been looking with pleasure and fascination through the stack of the massive things piled up next to me. The covers are quite handsome: an attractive old-fashioned illustration contained

## VISIT OUR WEBSITE

[www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com)

Don't miss out on our lively forum, movie reviews, podcasts, controversial and informative articles, and classic stories.

**Log on today!**

within a huge circle, almost as big as a page of this magazine, with a bright border, usually yellow or red, enclosing it. Here is the Winter, 1930 issue, the ninth, leading off with *The Birth of a New Republic*, a lengthy novel of interplanetary strife written by Miles J. Breuer, M.D., one of the most popular SF authors of the era, in collaboration with none other than Jack Williamson, no longer a teenage fan but now a successful writer. (Those who are curious about it, and I think it will still find appreciative readers after all these years, will find it reprinted in *The Metal Man and Others*, the first volume of Haffner Press's superb series of volumes collecting the work of Jack Williamson.) The theme is not unlike that of Robert Heinlein's much later novel *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, and its final passage is one that could almost have been written by Jack Williamson about himself at the other end of his ninety-eight-year-long life: "I am an old man now—there is no escaping that. . . . Now, from the eminence of a long life that has been for the most part peaceful and happy, I can foresee for my children a glorious United Solar System." One can only hope.

And here is the Spring-Summer 1932 issue, featuring "Invaders from the Infinite" by John W. Campbell, Jr. Campbell, only twenty-two years old then, would go on to become the most influential editor in the history of science fiction, but in 1932 he was highly regarded by readers for a series of gadget-happy space-adventure novels, now impenetrably unreadable, featuring three jut-jawed spacemen named Arcot, Morey, and Wade. The early Campbell novels are stiff doses. ("Each tube will handle up to a hundred thousand times the potential of zinc-copper in the acid of the yellow powder," said Stel Felso Theu. One hundred thousand times the potential of a copper-zinc coil in copper sulphate would be of the order of 110,000 volts. This was a thing as universal as the elements themselves.")

The Fall 1931 issue leads off with

"Seeds of Life" by John Taine, a great early SF novelist now unjustly forgotten. (His dinosaur novel, *Before the Dawn*, was one of the formative books of my youth.) *White Lily*, another splendid Taine novel, had run the year before. And another childhood favorite of mine turns up in the Fall 1929 issue: A. Hyatt Verrill, with the novel *The Bridge of Light*, telling of a lost civilization in South America. I first encountered Verrill at the age of eight, long before I had ever heard of science fiction, in his incarnation as a writer of popular history: his *Great Conquerors of South America*, about the exploits of Cortes, Pizarro, and the other *conquistadores*, was a book I read over and over, and I was delighted to find him again as a frequent contributor to the Gernsback and O'Conor Sloane magazines, usually with long novels set in remote corners of Latin America. Simply the titles of other *Quarterly* stories stir shivers of wonder in me: "The Ant With a Human Soul," "The Evolutionary Monstrosity," "When the Moon Ran Wild," "The Black Star Passes." Primitive stuff, maybe—but fascinating in its way.

The Depression had its impact on all magazines: *Amazing Stories Quarterly* managed only three issues in 1932, two in 1933, and one lone issue, reduced in size to 128 pages, before giving up the ghost entirely in 1934. But what a glorious run it had, eighty years ago! What a fine fat magazine it was, and what splendid epics of science and adventure are entombed in those huge, closely printed pages! I've had a lively archaeological experience this week, prowling these antediluvian magazines. Yes, most of these stories seem antiquated now, and the look of the magazines, page after page after page of solid type, can best be described as quaint. But in order to know who we are we need to know something of our history, and these musty old magazines form the building-blocks on which modern science fiction arose. It's a pleasure to own them and to go prowling through them now and then. ○

# Asimov's

SCIENCE FICTION

## CONGRATULATES THE WINNERS OF THE 2010 HUGO AWARDS

**Best Novel (tie)**

*The City & The City*  
China Miéville  
and

*The Windup Girl*  
Paolo Bacigalupi

**Best Novella**

"Palimpsest"  
Charles Stross

**Best Novelette**

"The Island"  
Peter Watts

**Best Short Story**

"Bridesicle"  
Will McIntosh  
*Asimov's*, January 2009

**Best Related Book**

*This is Me, Jack Vance! (Or, More Properly, This is "I")*  
Jack Vance

**Best Graphic Story**

*Girl Genius, Vol. 9*  
Kaja and Phil Foglio

**Best Dramatic Presentation:**

**Long Form**

*Moon*

**Best Dramatic Presentation:**

**Short Form**

*Doctor Who:  
"The Waters of Mars"*

**Best Professional Editor:**

**Long Form**

Patrick Nielsen Hayden

**Best Professional Editor:**

**Short Form**

Ellen Datlow

**Best Professional Artist**

Shaun Tan

**Best Semi-Pro Zine**

*Clarkesworld*  
Edited by Neil Clarke, Sean Wallace, & Cheryl Morgan

**Best Fanzine**

*StarShipSofa*  
Edited by Tony C. Smith

**Best Fan Writer**

Frederik Pohl

**Best Fan Artist**

Brad W. Foster

**John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer**

Seanan McGuire

# OUT OF THE DREAM CLOSET

David Ira Cleary

David Ira Cleary tells us he recently moved to Oakland, California, where "I live with my actress wife, two cats, and the sweetest cocker spaniel you could possibly imagine. The dog inspired the character of the Sphinx, while the themes were mostly generated by my favorite obsessions: free will, aging, mortality, and the philosophy of mind." Dave recently completed an alternate world mystery novel called *Waiting For Marshall Cheung*. During the day, he documents software for a company that makes Android smartphones.

The morning after the moodstorm, the Living Will came to her to bring grim news. "Your father plans to die." The Living Will was tall as a tree. It wore striped bell-bottoms and a vest with deep pockets. It had a mustache like tinsel. It crouched down, hunched over, resting its chin on fingers long as her forearm. It watched her with silver mirror-eyes. "I'm sorry to bring you this news, Sasha."

Sasha, blond hair in bangs, walnut-colored skin, eyes green as moss, said: "Call me Little Girl." No fake-man, no automaton, deserved to call her by her true name.

"Very well." A tear rolled down its eye. Good Gödel—a weeper. Maybe it was susceptible to the traces of last night's moodstorm. She hoped its eyeball tarnished. "I am sorry, Little Girl. I am here to prepare you for his death. I am here to tell you what you will inherit and how you will live with him gone."

"I'm busy," she said.

"Busy how?"

"Collecting," she said. She had a plastic pail beside her, sitting in the ankle-deep water.

"Collecting what?"

"You know," she said. "Stuff."

The Living Will watched her a while, then got up and walked away.

She was collecting souls in Rust Canyon, below the Mad Monk's Dam.

Rust Canyon. Cliff walls a mile high, made by moodstorms or by water, carved into metal-stone and polymer rock—the ruined cities of distant epochs, the landfills and boneyards of peoples dead ten thousand centuries. Where there'd been iron there were great ochre fans down cliffsides; where there'd been copper, verdigris. Little Girl liked to look for bones and platinum—bones for DNA and calcium, platinum for metal circuits. But what Rust Canyon was really good for was souls.

Moodstorms, tantrums of the cloudmind, thought-poor but rich with passion,

bursts of brain juice wind-driven down the canyon alleyways, scoured the cliff walls and raised clouds of dust and by the chemical affinity of brain juice for synapses like lock for key, lifted souls from riverbeds and pulled them loose from rock walls. Over years or lifetimes the souls had been carried downstream to the Mad Monk's Dam, where they had collected. Now Little Girl, wearing rubber hip waders, carrying a bucket and a stick with a hand at the end, walked in the shallow waters beneath the dam. The water was chrome-colored and corrosive, swirling in places with ribbons of red and orange and blue, where the residues of thoughts gone soft, heavy metal acids, had leached to the surface. Little Girl used to grab souls with her bare hands. The corrosive water would burn her hands and forearm, and the red and blistered skin would upset the Papa. But she got bored with that. Now she used her stick-hand.

The hand was tough brown demi-flesh. The stick carried a nerve bundle. When she gripped the stick from its end, she could feel what the hand felt and she could move its fingers. She lowered the stick. The water was warm and comfortable. She dragged the fingers along the lake floor, touching things. Gravel, sharp edges like glass, jawbones, scuttling tin millipedes and squishy grease worms, then at last souls, hard and round and clumped together or encrusted like barnacles to rocks or asbestos shells. She felt for souls that were just a little rough: ones that were polished smooth were too old, while pitted or smashed ones had usually lost character. Stuck to a rebar reef, she found four good ones, substantial, sandpaper-textured, giving her the faint buzz of dreams or simple cogitations. She grabbed each one carefully with the stick hand, twisted it loose, then brought it up.

She was examining the fourth soul, gray but giving off a rainbow sheen as she turned it in the sunlight, when she heard Alistair Jones shouting at her: "Sasha! Sasha! Walnut Pasha!"

He was climbing down the Mad Monk's Dam, using the bas-relief sculptures that decorated its face as handholds, clutching stone scrolls, grasping noses and beards, stepping on tonsured heads. At last he jumped into the water, and ran splashing to her. He was double-jointed and had hair colored shiny-black. The acidic water didn't seem to hurt him.

He was the cloudmind's only son.

"Sassy Sasha!"

"Don't call me that."

"Sullen Sasha!"

"Call me Little Girl."

Alistair Jones furrowed his brow. "Well! Why?"

"What does 'Sasha' mean? Nothing. But 'Little Girl' pretty much says it all."

"Okay," Alistair said. "What are you doing with that hand?"

Little Girl flared angry at Alistair. She'd wanted him to argue with her about the name. She said, "Are you dumb? What's it look like I'm doing?"

"You're digging up souls. What for? Are you going to eat them?"

Ingested souls might give you a buzz but more likely would leave you constipated. "Not likely."

"Then why?" He arched his eyebrow. "Oh, are you going to try and catch a sphinx? Are you going to seat a soul in one?" He stepped toward her, excited. "Can I help, Sa—Can I help you catch a sphinx, Little Girl?"

She was disappointed that her plan had been so obvious. It made her mad. She said, "No, that's not it, and you can't help, anyway."

"Then what are you going to do?"

"Nothing you'd find interesting."

"Oh."

She dropped the soul into her bucket. He stood there glumly as she stepped

around him and put the stick-hand back in the water. She had just found another soul, slightly perforated so she wasn't sure whether it was good enough, when he said, "Hey, Little Girl, want to see my tits?"

"Never glum for long. "Hardly."

"Look."

Despite herself, she glanced at Alistair. She expected him to be lifting his shirt. Instead he was holding out his hand. In his palm, there grew two little breasts, milky-white and pendulous, with carmine nipples and blue veins she could see connecting to the big vein at the base of his thumb. "I found some bio-code inside the Mad Monk's tomb."

"Who cares?" she said. "That's stupid."

She turned and went back to work.

Little Girl sorted souls.

By size as you go right to left, by buzz as you go top to bottom. They lay upon her dissection table. She'd soaked them in buffering solution to neutralize the acid, and now as she handled them, they sent emotional pulses through her hands and arms. Shivers of pity, currents of fear, waves of melancholy. And itches of sentiment, goose bumps of lust, fluxions of hope. All of it subtle, none of it strong enough to move her one way or another. Well, of course. These were old souls. The thing to do was cut one up and see if she could absorb some thought juice directly.

She chose a small soul with the largest buzz: it had a sweet sadness like hot chocolate on a rainy day.

It had a knobby brown carapace to protect it from the acid waters. She took her number three scalpel and placed its edge between two knobs.

"What are you up to, Little Girl?" Startled, she set the soul rolling as the scalpel screeched on the steel table. "Drat!" She caught the soul. "Why are you bothering me, you big metal monster?"

It was the Living Will. His shiny eyes blinked sadly. He was too big to come in her room so he was looking at her from outside her window. Her room was in the Tower. She figured he had climbed onto the roof of the main building, the Elderhaus, so that he could see her. "I need to talk to you. I need to prepare you for your father's death."

"I'm busy," she said.

"I can see that. Cutting up souls, a fine hobby. To wet your fingers with the thoughts of a dead person; an excellent pastime."

It rankled her that he knew so much about her. "That's not what I'm doing."

"Really?" His mirror eyes widened. She saw herself reflected: convex, brown, and double. "What are you doing, then?"

"Nothing. Nothing I'd want the Papa to know about."

"Is that so?" The Living Will tapped thoughtfully on the window pane. His long pink fingernails had dark lines across them, regular as the marks on a meter stick. "I hope you're not messing with souls beyond slicing open their shells. Your father finds out you're perverting them or resurrecting them in a body, the terms of his will might be affected."

"Don't worry," Little Girl said. Her palm was wet as she squeezed the soul; apparently she *had* cut the soul a little, and some juices were leaking out. She felt sadder, less interested in provoking the Papa or the Living Will. "Souls are stupid anyway."

"Well, that's true." The Living Will seemed relieved. "I know you don't care to talk much about your father, but I think you need to know some facts."

She put down the soul. "Whatever."

"Your father's getting old."

"Nine-hundred sixty-nine," she said.

# *Stories from the Golden Age* WHERE ADVENTURE COMES TO LIFE

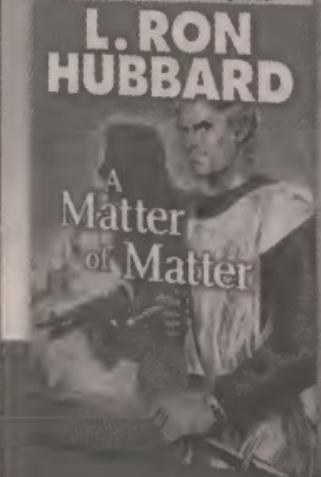
"...stunning writing ability."  
—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

"...pulp fiction at its most entertaining." —BOOKLIST

#1 New York Times Bestselling Author

L. RON HUBBARD

A Matter of Matter



## A MATTER OF MATTER

Chuck Lambert is taken advantage of by an unsavory real estate swindler of a galactic economy that sells unwary customers like him a planet where they can't sit down, because there's something the matter with its matter. But even though swindled, Chuck may just end up getting the last laugh.

- Paperback \$9.95 • Unabridged audiobook, 2 CDs \$9.95
- Available wherever books and audiobooks are sold

More Stories from the Golden Age tales await! For free gifts, catalogs, games, story downloads and more go to [GoldenAgeStories.com](http://GoldenAgeStories.com) or call toll-free 1-877-842-5299.

© 2010 Galaxy Press, LLC. All Rights Reserved. AW1210

"Yes. He handled souls, when he was a boy, did you know that?"

"So?"

"Souls aren't just moods. They're not just thoughts. They are biocodes, too. Physical instructions, streams of messages."

"Messenger RNA," she said. "Protein Turing tapes."

"Good. So you know all the hard names. And you know how the codes can affect not just your brain, but your body as a whole."

"Yeah. So he's tumored up and destabilized."

"Worse than that. He's spawning organs, homunculi, strange creatures—maybe alien."

"Really?" That sounded cool. "Maybe I should go see him?"

"Maybe. My point here, is his cells are compromised, his body's breaking down."

"So? Why not get a deep body-flush?"

"He'd replace so many cells, it would be a kind of death."

"He's scared of the Continuity Threshold?" Little Girl said. "That's lame."

The Living Will tapped his nails nervously against the window. "Not being self-aware, I'm unsuited to judging your father's fears one way or another."

"They're dumb fears," she said. "The Continuity Threshold is malarkey. Our minds lose continuity every time we sleep."

"You would know," the Living Will said. "But I'm not the one to argue with."

She touched the soul and got a shimmy of sadness. "You're saying I should go argue with him?"

"I'm not saying that at all." His eyes blinked, mirrors sheeny with yellow lubricant. "I'm to tell you that your father is turning himself off three days from now."

She had met the Living Will once before, after her mother fell to her death. Her Out of the Dream Closet

mother had been a scholarly woman obsessed with the biomechanics of spirituality—whether a soul could be divided, and if so, how many times before awareness itself disappeared; whether if a soul were replicated then placed into identical cloned bodies the resurrected awarenesses would diverge or remain in lockstep, spirits resilient despite the vagaries of experience; finally whether a soul planted in a semi-autonomous machine, say a sphinx or smarthouse, would be a moral being. It was said that she, while pondering these questions, tripped and fell into the Gash Peculiar, that fissure so deep it touched the Earth's hot core and where her body was presumably incinerated.

Her mother—the Living Will told her—had left her a toolset for examining souls. And a cache of dreams, like the dreams the Papa sent the cloudmind, only smaller.

Sasha (still Sasha; this was long ago) was too sad to experiment with souls then.

But she used the dreams to smooth the sharp edges of her grief when otherwise to sleep meant only nightmares.

Little Girl had not seen her father since her sixty-fourth birthday.

She could wait one more day.

She wanted to have something to show him, anyway. And the Living Will had given her an idea. Perverting souls, resurrecting souls: that would be interesting. She didn't know much about any of this, though. So she took the stairs down to the cellar and went to the library. The library was a scary place. Thirty rows of stacks, each stack honeycombed with memories, scattered between the stacks of bioluminescent limestone growths, rising from the floor or descending from the ceiling, providing a wan blue light that did not so much illuminate the library as distort it, making stalactites look like hanged men, memories like the compound eyes of insects. And there was a sense of confusion or panic; there was no diagram, no index, no attendant to help you find what you wanted. She stood with her hand on a cold wet stalagmite, sense of unease rising as she considered how complex and unfathomable the library really was.

"Oh," she said. She remembered now, there were catalogs. Special memories set in the center stacks, dark red like drying blood despite the blue light. She walked carefully to the catalog area, touching limestone or running her fingers along the honeycombs as if her eyes could not be trusted. She still felt unease or even dread. It was only as she reached the catalogs, and pulled out the two-inch vial, that she realized why she was afraid. The Papa must have cycled some sort of fear juice into the library since she had been there last.

To keep her out.

She chewed off the end of the vial and drank down the catalog.

It tasted of eel.

A twist in her stomach, a motion in her head; she was dizzy. She hugged the stalagmite so she wouldn't fall. Maybe she didn't have the enzyme to digest the catalog. And now she was cold, too, shivering. By Gödel; she didn't want to be sick. She would have no interest in perverting souls if she wanted to throw up.

But then the dizziness was gone and her stomach felt fine.

She was still cold. That was all right. Cold was how the catalog must work. Or rather, hot; she walked a few steps forward and felt warmer, then a few steps farther and felt cold again. The catalog was one of those that let your skin temperature indicate the proximity of the memory you wanted. *How to pervert souls*. Experimentally, she thought of something else, *How to sew on a patch*, and she felt suddenly so cold she wondered if the library contained no sewing memories.

*How to pervert souls.*

Good; she was warm again.

It took her a few minutes to distinguish the temperature differentials of the catalog from the currents of warm air coming from ceiling vents. Once she could do that, though, she found the memory quickly. In the clear vial the memory juice was colored lilac. She found another memory for perverting souls then, two stacks over, found a memory for resurrecting them.

She didn't ingest any of those memories.

She'd wait until she had some likely souls before her.

The tower had a hundred rooms, and a hundred stories: one room per floor. The center of the tower was a stairwell contained within a great segmented ferro-carbon tube. The tube rotated, each segment turning at a different rate, each room moving along with it. Because the rooms were brightly colored, green, yellow, blue; and because they could be anywhere along the circuit, the tower as a whole looked like a prayer-flag.

The seventh room from the top was colored hunter's orange. It was a tool-shop, and forbidden to her. But she didn't try to subvert the lock that the Papa had installed on its door. She simply climbed out the window of the next room up, jumped down on the tool-shop roof as it passed beneath her, then crawled through the vent connected to the fume-hood inside. It was scary as she swung down into the vent—a twelve-hundred foot drop to the pitched stone roof of the Elderhaus. It would have been easier if she wasn't scared of heights.

She dropped from the fume-hood to a work table.

The tool-shop smelled of antiseptic and preservative. Lab equipment—cases, glassware, scanners, work-limbs and etc.—glittered frostlike, stuck in time lock. It was cold enough to give her goose-bumps. The machinery was stacked on shelves. Somewhere there were tools for soul work. Little Girl hoped she'd find out *which* tools soon.

She pulled out a plastic container in which she'd put the five best souls, big and buzzy. Then she pulled out the memory for perverting souls.

In daylight, the memory was colored pink.

She chewed off the end of the vial and drank the memory down.

She itched, she yawned, she felt a stranger walk inside of her.

She saw the tool-shop with the eyes of a technician.

Everything had names, now. This case a protein sequencer, this construction of metal plates a femto-assembler. And this—a narrow cabinet six feet high with many closed drawers, supported by four bronze feet, claw-toed like the feet of a lion—this was the soulmixer. It was the tool she would use to pervert the souls.

No, not pervert. Enhance, amplify, improve.

The new memories were awkward in her head, intrusive, foreign, lacking the ease of real thoughts, feeling wrong like an ill-fitting hat.

But they worked.

On a shelf, she found a tool called an icebreaker. With it she tapped the soulmixer.

With a whine, the time lock attenuated, bright stress patterns rippling through the surface. Curdled time, glowing red, fell like embers to the floor, hissing before vanishing.

Little Girl touched a lever atop the cabinet.

From recessed panels at the sides of the cabinet emerged two arms, gray and shiny but shaped just like human arms. The hands wore elegant white evening gloves. Coming out at shoulder-height, the arms made the narrow cabinet look like a torso, and as the hands reached to pull open the two doors, it was like a headless man opening his coat.

Her father's face leered at her from the cabinet's dark interior.

"Sasha!" he said.

"Call me Little Girl."

It was just a projection, but it looked real. His eyebrow arched. His face was florid. His jowls hung like wattles. The Papa looked fat, but not as fat as he was now. No, this look was forty or fifty years old. And the automaton that ran it was stupid. "Sasha!"

She had to play. "What do you want?"

"Souls are not toys."

"That's good. I'm too old for games."

"You are forever innocent!"

"I'm sixty-seven years old."

"Souls are for adults. There is no greater responsibility than that of a curator of the consciousness of a human being. This responsibility consists of ensuring the integrity and completeness of the soul. Souls are not to change."

"Just like I'm not to change?"

"Sasha!"

She'd led the automaton off track. "What do you want?"

"Change means decay, and decay means death. Perpetual stasis is our ideal. Do not dilute a soul; do not augment one. Neither an emotion more nor a perception less. A changed soul is an abomination."

"What about turning yourself off? Isn't that a change?"

"Sasha!"

"Stuff it," she said. She waved the icebreaker at the face, and with a static crackle, it disappeared.

Lights came on inside the cabinet.

It contained a sequence of stacked glass spheres, vertically connected by clear tubes, rising initially from a big sphere resting on the bottom of the cabinet. From the spheres there projected spigots that connected to other tubes. These tubes led down to a glass cone set beside the big sphere. Both the cone and the big sphere were subdivided by glass plates studded with gleaming electronic components.

The soulmixer was for dissolving souls and recombining them.

Little Girl knew how to use it.

The big sphere was the donor crematorium. You had to destroy a soul to make a soul. She opened its side. A platinum-wire crèche emerged on an asbestos-lined platform. She took out the second-buzziest soul. It reminded her of a cool summer evening after a hot day. It would make a fine donor. She set it in the crèche. The platform retracted into the sphere.

The glass cone was the recipient incubator. Its crèche had a small heating element. You had to heat a soul just slightly to make it amenable to new awarenesses. She opened it and put theuzziest soul on its crèche. This soul was tinged with loneliness. Like a crowded room where you're too shy to talk.

Mixing the two souls would be cool.

She flicked a switch to start the machine.

It throbbed. It shook. Bands of electric light moved up the big sphere, faster and faster, as the soul took bursts of heat and volleys of radioactive particles. The soul seemed to cringe, puckers deepening, nodules writhing. It glowed red, then yellow. Then with a *thunk* it exploded, white-hot bits of shell flying glassward, and a plume of black smoke and ashes gloriously colored—carmine and emerald and royal purple—rising from the crèche. The soul had been cremated.

Now it would be distilled.

Driven upward by heat, the ashes passed into successive spheres. In each sphere, shortwave radiation of a particular frequency—ultraviolet in this sphere, x-rays in this one, gamma rays in that one—freed moods or awarenesses of a different class: proprioception, causality, meaningfulness, and so on, stripping backbone molecules exother-



# BATTLESTAR GALACTICA

THE EXHIBITION

OPEN NOW AT EMP | SFM  
SEATTLE, WA

[EMPSFM.ORG/BSG](http://EMPSFM.ORG/BSG)

SyFy

EMP



mically and thus cooling the awarenesses so that they precipitated and drained into a collection drain, ready to go to the other soul. How much went to the other soul was controlled by the spigots for each sphere. Too much, the soul would burst. Too little, the soul would have been expanded for no good reason. Today Little Girl opened the spigot on the third sphere wide, allowing the sense of meaning and spirituality to flow shiny and generous into the glass cone. The other spigots: causality, morality, sense of rhythm, and all the rest, she opened to just a trickle. Dull colors, tarnished silvers, coppery greens, blended into a muddy brown fluid that fell sticky into the cone.

And meanwhile the second soul, resting in the recipient cone, bathed in a solution of alcohol and salts, had been warmed so that it expanded slightly. Cracks in its carapace had widened, microscopic holes enlarged; and it was through these apertures that the awarenesses penetrated the soul. With the salt as catalyst and the alcohol as building blocks of the backbone, the awarenesses crowded into the soul, integrating with the processes already there or after bold biochemical battle replacing them. Or (Little Girl loved *this* outcome) joining incorrectly with an existing awareness to make a monster: happy-terror or bleak-joy or erotic-time.

The solution went from clear to gray as awarenesses dripped down into it.

Bits of awareness and broken moods bubbled up from the soul, sometimes leaving a bone-white ring in the narrow part of the cone.

At last, the donor soul was extinct, the tubes emptied, and the recipient soul was sated with new awarenesses.

The crèche slid out from the glass cone.

The wet soul had the sharp scent of ethyl alcohol.

She touched it. It felt strange.

It made her feel like all the universe was lonely.

\*\*\*

The sphinxes lived in a vast warehouse in the desert east of the Gash Peculiar.

Little Girl, five value-added souls in her pocket, parasol to shade her from the sun, walked across the warehouse's sand-covered roof, looking for an entrance. The warehouse was buried beneath sand, fine white sand that piled into dunes or was wind-swept so shallow you could see rusting remnants of building machinery: fan blades, pipes that went nowhere, and gray boxes presumably dangerous, for they triggered in her a sense of fear whenever she got too close to them.

The roof was big, a rectangle four miles by three, and she was frustrated. She knew there were doors, trapdoors—she'd been down one years ago—but she couldn't remember where they were. The dunes shifted endlessly. She could spend weeks tromping around and kicking sand before she uncovered a trapdoor.

The thing to do was try the last memory.

It was for resurrecting souls inside a sphinx, but it might have instructions on finding one, too.

She sat down on the side of a sand dune. She pushed the handle of the parasol into the sand so that the parasol stood up and kept her shaded. She pulled out the last memory vial. She drank the memory down.

It tasted of butterscotch.

She sat waiting. She watched hot wind blow a dust devil across the roof. She gazed with contempt at her small hands and little feet shod in soft-wire slippers. Suddenly her stomach felt unsettled, and she burped.

Her guts wrenched inside her.

It was a bad memory.

The sky turned green as she passed out.

"Why are you lying there like that, Sasha?"

She was on her side, cheek pressed against the warm sand. In the distance the roof marked the horizon. Close-by, the Living Will squatted beside her in his striped bell-bottoms and his huge patent leather shoes. Clutching her belly, she rolled so she could see his face. "Call me Little Girl. I've got a stomachache."

He said, "Very well, Little Girl." Then he closed his eyes for a while. She wondered if he had figured out she had been poisoned by a memory and was now silently summoning medical help. The silver of his eyes showed through his translucent eyelids. Finally he looked at her and said, "We must discuss the disposal of your father's estate."

"What?"

"We must discuss the disposal of your father's estate."

"I heard you the first time. What about *me*?" She groaned and clasped her stomach.

"This is about you. It concerns you directly. You are your father's only daughter and the only autonomous being he has engendered. Therefore, and also because of the respect and affection he holds for you—"

"—respect?"

"—and affection he holds for you, he intends to give you all his possessions, including his estate and his semi-autonomous agents, on the understanding that you will meet the following two conditions: one, you will not pervert a soul or cause a perverted soul to be reborn, and two, you will forthwith and forever agree to maintain the cloudmind, soothing its rages, encouraging its generosity, and persuading it to return from its absences."

"The cloudmind?" Her stomach lurched. "That stupid . . . bitch!"

The Living Will regarded her silently. Then he said, "I wasn't aware that the cloudmind had a sex."

"She doesn't! It's just a way of speaking!"

"You are shouting, Little Girl."

"I'm in pain. I'm just saying the cludmind's mean. Worse than mean—she's insane!"

"Your father sends her gentle dreams, to soothe her in her rages."

"I know that." A foul moodstorm meant the Papa would spend three days in his dream closet, issuing pleasant fantasies and bucolic visions in an attempt to calm the cludmind. Her stomach lurched again. "He wants to drop the responsibility of handling her temper onto *my* shoulders? Is *that* why he wants to die?"

"I'm not capable of guessing motives."

Little Girl groaned and closed her eyes.

When she looked again, the Living Will was gone.

Someone gave her a cup of viscous milky fluid to drink. She finished it and then sat up. She was inside the warehouse, sitting beside Alistair Jones.

"You looked awful. Dehydrated and everything. I brought you down here."

Here was the roof of a module within the warehouse. Modules—storage containers fifty feet long and ten feet deep—were arrayed like buildings on a street. Only these buildings had buildings below them, and more buildings farther down, for the warehouse went a half mile into the earth, and there were many levels. And the street was one of rails not pavement, and in three dimensions, for there were rails along most of the levels. Along some of the rails there ran delivery carts, all she could see empty of cargo, but moving as if with intention. Lit sporadically by glowglobes, the warehouse looked infinitely long and infinitely deep.

Her stomach felt better. The milky stuff must be an antidote for the poison. "I wanted to find out how to catch a sphinx."

"You should have asked me for help. I could have run a bioassay on you, found out which memory proteins you have enzymes for, which you were intolerant to."

"I like to do my own research."

"Clearly."

He sounded hurt.

Little Girl felt bad for not being gracious. "Thanks for helping me."

"It was nothing," Alistair said.

"It was more than the Living Will would do."

"Who's that?"

"Just an automaton. He says the Papa is terminating himself."

"That's bad. I'm sorry." Alistair made to touch her shoulder, but she shrugged him off. He said, "He's sort of my father, too."

"You don't have a father."

"You know what I mean."

What Alistair meant was that dreams the Papa once sent to the cludmind after a particularly bad moodstorm so delighted her that she rained down biocodes for fertility, rekindling a time-locked embryo in the Plaza of Echoes.

Alistair asked, "Is he sick or something?"

"Not so much. It's mostly that he's lazy."

"Maybe you could get him to change his mind."

"Maybe." She felt anger smoldering inside her and wanted to change the subject. "I've got some souls I want to put in sphinxes."

He examined his fingernails carefully. "Yeah?"

"So, do you think you could help me with it?"

His face lit up so bright she wondered if he had luminescence stitched into his hemoglobin. "I think I could, Little Girl."

They rode a delivery cart a mile to the north and ninety levels deep, avoiding the Out of the Dream Closet

grasp of robot arms that tried to pick them up and stack them in modules, singing along hesitantly with the cart, who was crazy:

"Racks of tongue and drums of ears,  
"We ship 'em.  
"Packs of skin and tuns of tears.  
"We ship 'em-  
"Quick!"

Down deep in the warehouse the modules were bigger than those higher up. The cart took them to one that must have been a quarter mile wide. Creaking robot arms like segmented lead pipes reached for them, but instead of lying low in the cart to avoid being grabbed, Alistair said, "This is the sphinx house! Come on!" And then he rolled out onto the delivery bay.

Little Girl followed him, the robot arm just swiping her shoulder as she rolled out of the cart.

"You want to crawl," Alistair told her. "Sphinxes can be flighty."

The delivery bay had a big door that opened into the side of the module. They crawled toward it. They followed the retreating arms inside. Inside was brightly lit at first. They saw random things precariously stacked: a boulder, a book, a corset, a tire, and a musical keyboard in one stack; a work boot, a beanbag, a jackhammer, and the mounted skeleton of a deep-sea bass in another. The effect was of a museum, not a warehouse. Beyond the section of random stacks, the lighting was inconsistent, flickering fluorescent tubes separated by patches of darkness. Noise, maybe the crackling of the dying fluorescents, came from deep within the module. Far off in the darkness there seemed to be motion and maybe more random stacks.

There was the smell of dust and of machine oil.

"Where are the sphinxes?"

"Whisper. Follow me."

They crawled into the darkness. What she had taken for stacks of things turned out to be long-dead refrigerated containers. She wanted to look inside them, but Alistair kept her crawling. "There. See them?"

Out of the gloom, the sphinxes resolved.

There was a small herd of them, fifteen or twenty. They were about her size but quadruped. They were grazing on the floor of the module, chewing through the rusty corrugated floor to get at something beneath it, probably insulation. As they chewed, their diamond-hard teeth raised sparks from the metal. The bright sparks lit their muscular haunches and their stubby hairless wings.

"Okay, let's get closer."

They crawled a little more. Metal shavings on the floor pricked her hands. "Stop," Alistair said. "Now watch this," he said. "What has eyes but no face? What is red when there is no light?"

He spoke loudly, and the sphinxes reacted.

They raised their heads and turned. Their eyes glowed orange.

"What is analog in the morning, binary in the afternoon, and decimal at night?"

"Cool," Little Girl whispered. She saw what he was doing.

He was baiting the sphinxes with riddles.

The sphinxes were walking toward them now.

"How can a man leave a room he never entered?"

As they came closer, they passed behind a refrigerator. By a trick of perspective, it looked as though they were disappearing *inside* the refrigerator. Little Girl moved to her left so she could get a better view—

—and a long sharp shaving sunk into her knee.

"Oww!"

She shouted so loudly the echo was like a dozen girls screaming.

Craziness. The sphinxes ran. They ran in all directions, banging into refrigerators, knocking down random stacks, their stubby wings beating uselessly. A pair of them bore down on her and Alistair as if intending violence, but then changed course at the last moment.

Most of the sphinxes ended up leaving by the delivery bay. Little Girl thought they would be stuck there or maybe fall off the platform to their deaths. But they recovered from their panic and began jumping to the delivery cart monorail, then walking along it with surprising grace.

"Nice job, Sasha."

"My knee is *bleeding*. And don't call me Sasha."

Alistair was angry. "You and your dumb—" he started, then he broke off. He stared at where the sphinxes had been grazing. "Look at that. Will you look at that!"

He was on his feet now, hurrying, and Little Girl stood up and followed him. In a hole in the floor some five feet wide and two feet deep, there was a sphinx. It was on its belly. It had the face of a balding middle-aged man, somewhat overweight; its body was of a half-grown lion.

Its rear left leg was broken and dislocated savagely so that it was extended at a right angle to its body.

It stared at them with frightened yellow eyes.

Alistair said, "How is a matchstick like spring vacation?"

The sphinx smiled, showing its diamond teeth.

The riddle had worked; it seemed to relax. "Help," it said.

They found a length of plastic pipe and a roll of duct tape, and after raising the sphinx's body by wedging floor tiles beneath it, Alistair set the broken leg. Ligaments popped as the thigh bone went back into the pelvic socket and the sundered bone snapped back together. Little Girl held the sphinx's shoulders because they thought it might struggle because of the pain. But aside from making a soft keening and crying a few milky tears, the sphinx acquitted itself well.

That close to it, she could smell its sweat, which was like musk mixed with motor oil.

They used the length of pipe as a splint, binding it to the sphinx's thigh with duct tape.

Then they helped the sphinx up from the hole. They found a wheeled dolly the sphinx could rest its broken leg upon, while pulling itself along with its three good legs. "We've got something that will make you feel better," Alistair said.

"Yes?" the sphinx said.

"Little Girl?"

"What? Oh!" She reached into her pocket, and pulled out one of the souls she had enhanced. It seemed like a good one; just touching it made her feel both relaxed and excited. "You'll like this," she told the sphinx.

"Yes?" the sphinx said, greed in its eyes.

Little Girl offered the soul to the sphinx.

"No!" Alistair said, grabbing the soul as the sphinx opened its mouth to eat it.

"What?" Little Girl said.

"That's not how you do it," Alistair said.

"Then how?"

"Watch. Close your eyes, sphinx."

Alistair began stroking the sphinx. It purred, shivers of pleasure rippling down its haunches. He motioned for Little Girl to give him the soul. Then all at once he squeezed the sphinx's shoulder blades together forcefully. The sphinx went still and rigid, as a plate opened in the back of its head. A soul cradle, webbed bioform shiny with mucous, emerged on a reticulated stalk. As always when looking inside someone's head, Little Girl felt like a voyeur.

Alistair put the soul into the cradle.  
With a whir, the cradle returned to the head, carrying the soul.  
The sphinx opened its eyes and said, "Am I hungry?"

And how the sphinx could eat. They brought it to Alistair's house and watched it gorge itself. It plowed through a bucket of pink insulation. It scarfed down a spool of #4 coaxial cable. It munched down a wall display of Hermes-head beetles. It ate ass jaws, pig's feet, calf's liver, synthburger, and a rack of triceratops ribs, all from the freezer. In the kitchen it reduced a box of oats to crumbs, a cask of honey-wine to residue. It finished off a serving ladle and sucked down a string of Crone's Spice that was surely decorative. It ate tassels from a nice rug, the leaves of a gardenia, the head of a mop, the skin of a drum, and three dozen eggs. It ate so ravenously and omnivorously, so intently and obsessively, that Alistair suggested they might have to tear out the soul before its stomach burst from over-consumption or the soft pink heart of the house's intelligence was destroyed.

But then, strips of yellow wallpaper in its claws, torn-open sofa before it like a butchered carcass, stretch marks clearly visible on its patchy-furred distended belly, it dropped a box of fish-food it had been holding in its mouth.

It said: "Am I tired?"

Then it fell to a deep sleep atop the ruined sofa.

In the evening, there was a moodstorm.

Alistair's Cliffside house had a porch with a big window that gave a view of the Gash Peculiar. They sat there with the sphinx. Storm clouds black as ink billowed up over the canyon walls opposite them. Purple squalls of acid rain moved like monster brushes across the cliff faces. Periodically waves of rain would reach them, drops drumming against the roof, dislodging conglomerate bits of stone and souls and other human artifacts from the cliffside two dozen meters distant, sending them down to the dark thousand-mile deep crevice that was the Gash Peculiar.

The rain brought moods, depressions bleak as sunless moons, brief euphorias, but mostly a backdrop of wistfulness and sentiment that put them in a reflective or sweetly melancholic state of mind.

"Am I sad?" asked the sphinx, double-chin resting between its forepaws. Sitting beside it, Little Girl stroked its round bald head, feeling hairs too fine to see. It hadn't eaten since the afternoon but just in case it got out of control again, Alistair had a device in hand, a wand, that would send out a electromagnetic pulse to knock it unconscious.

"It's the cloudmind," Alistair said. He never called it *mother*.

"She's a fucking bitch," Little Girl remarked. She had to curse to keep from crying. This memory kept coming: *her own mother* had fallen into the Gash. "I'm sorry, sphinx. We scared you so you broke your leg. Then we made you hungry. And we brought you here and the cloudmind has ruined everything."

"Am I called Nestor?" asked the sphinx.

"Whatever. You were hungry, and happy, and now the cloudmind's made you sad."

"I don't know if that's exactly what the soul we gave it does," Alistair said. "I think it more makes Nestor have a bigger appetite for everything. Maybe a bigger capacity for feeling."

She wanted to curse Alistair for contradicting her, but she didn't because he had tears running down his cheeks. Suddenly she felt a pang in her chest—why was he nice to her when she was mean to him?—and she looked away, at the sphinx's, Nestor's, yellow eyes. The oval-shaped pupils looked more cat than human. "Poor sphinx."

The sphinx shifted, lunch inside its swollen gut clanking.

The rain intensified, drops batteing against the big window; and the realization that her father would be dead soon intensified too. "And if the cludmind's bad now," she said, slowly, dully, "it's going to be even worse, once the Papa's gone."

"But maybe you'd do a better job," Alistair said. "Keeping the cludmind happy."

The prospect seemed to smother her. "I don't want to even fucking try."

"Oh." The storm quieted, rainfall just taps. But on the other side of the canyon a chunk of rock, building-sized, slipped loose, its great size giving the illusion that gravity pulled it down but slowly. The Gash Peculiar seemed to groan as the rock fell into it. "Maybe you could stop your father."

She turned. "What do you mean?"

Alistair met her gaze. He didn't look embarrassed by his tears. "Give him memories, maybe even part of a soul, to make him change his mind. Do something to him to make him want to live."

She rubbed the folds of flesh at the back of Nestor's neck. She could just feel the seam where the edge of the plate met neck. She didn't say anything.

"Well, do you think we should attempt something with your father?"

Warmth suffused her. Suddenly she wanted to reach out and kiss Alistair. Instead she said:

"Hell. It couldn't hurt to try."

They planned to meet early next morning to decide on a strategy for changing the Papa. The day had been long and full and if you added the moodstorm to that, she was left exhausted. The one positive of the storm was that the Papa would have to delay shutting down, to give him time to console the cludmind.

"Is that Nestor? Tell me!"

She and the sphinx had reached her house and were walking through the long portico which led corridor-like to the front door. The dolly the sphinx pulled itself along with click-clicked on the tiled floor. The walls were of a polished pink marble devoid of any mood and reflective; she could see herself, wan, tired, her eyes old-seeming in the young girl body. The sphinx was looking at itself suspiciously. "Is that Nestor?" it repeated. "Tell me!"

"Yeah," she said. "Haven't you ever seen a mirror?"

The sphinx grinned. "Is Nestor handsome? Is Nestor beautiful?"

"Come on," she said.

"Do Nestor's teeth make rainbows?"

"This way," she said. She waved the electromag wand at Nestor, and he limped after her. He may have been stupid, but he had figured out already that being knocked out cold even for a few minutes was no fun.

She wondered if the sphinx would be her last chance to ever shock the Papa.

They took the lift to her room. Nestor, eager, limped in ahead of her. Her heart pounded when she saw the remaining souls, still arrayed on the table, like a selection of chocolates. But Nestor did not go for the souls. He went to her window. Dark out, the window partly reflected the starglobe light above her experiment station. And partly reflected Nestor. "Is Nestor pretty? Are his eyelashes like golden wheat? Is his double-chin like the curve of fresh-fallen snow?"

"If you know how to talk poetically, why can't you say 'I' instead of 'Nestor'?"

"Are Nestor's words like honey?"

"Whatever." She fingered a soul, a dull one. "You hungry?"

Nestor, regarding himself in three-quarters profile, swallowed as if to test himself. "Is Nestor's Adam's apple like the vapor-shrouded moon?"

A faint voice said: "Who is that with you, Little Girl?"

She started. Had one of the souls spoken? But you never get a soul with buzz so strong that contextually relevant cogitations manifest.

A tap at the window. "Hey, Little Girl."

It was the Living Will. He was outside her room, probably clinging to a drainpipe, looking at her with his shiny mirror eyes. "What's that there with you, Little Girl?"

She was too tired to have it out with the Living Will. She wondered if he was smart enough to figure out what she'd done with the sphinx. "It's my friend. My boyfriend."

"That? A sphinx? An automaton?"

"Move over," she told the sphinx, as she stepped closer to the window. "It's mostly biological."

"I see. I should apprise your father of this boyfriend."

"Why? Is 'relations with automatons' an inheritance deal-breaker too?"

Nestor hadn't moved though she'd told him to. He was staring at the Living Will's mirrored eyes. "Two Nestors? Which is the prettier one? Tell me!"

"They're the same, Nestor. Now can you move?"

The sphinx limped sideways, the dolly squeaking.

The Living Will said, "I also see you have fewer souls on your table."

She shrugged. "So?"

The Living Will closed its eyes. She was pretty sure it was communicating with the Papa. It couldn't even make simple judgments on its own.

"Are Nestor's paws cute and softly padded?" the sphinx inquired, as he began to lick one paw.

By the time the Living Will opened its eyes again, she felt anxious. The Papa knew what she'd done to the sphinx, and she was about to suffer the consequences.

The Living Will said, "Your father turns himself off tomorrow."

She tried to affect a yawn of boredom, and it turned into a real yawn, part exhaustion, part anxiety. "He's not going to put it off because of the moodstorm?"

"He is working all night to propitiate the cloudmind."

"Great. I'm looking forward to taking his place. Next storm it will be me losing sleep."

"I'm glad you are accepting of the new order that is to be."

"Accepting! I was being sarcastic! I don't want to deal with the cloudmind bitch!"

She felt tears in her eyes. "I don't want the Papa to die!"

Nestor stopped licking his paw, and leaned his head against her waist.

"Ah," said the Living Will. "Your father expected you might still be resistant. In fact, he sent me here to give you one more reason that he was turning himself off."

"I'm all ears," she said.

"He is punishing himself, because he has failed you."

"Failed? How?"

"He has not fulfilled his obligations to you as a parent. He has not optimized your happiness. He has not kept your brain at ten as he has kept your body."

Oh, the old arguments, this time through a proxy. "It was keeping my body at ten that was the failure!"

"But ten is the ideal age for happiness."

"That's what he thinks." So tired. "This is dumb, turning himself off to punish himself. It's just another way of being irresponsible."

"You should know his reasons." Something shifted beneath the Living Will. Then there was a scraping, a clattering, and he was gone for a moment. A roof tile must have given way beneath him. When she saw him again his face was forty-five degrees off vertical, as if he'd climbed to a higher part of the roof and now had to lean to his left. "And another thing," the Living Will said, "remember that a resurrected soul is an abomination. He trusts you have not installed one in this sphinx."

"Neither an emotion more nor a perception less," she quoted.

"Good," the Living Will said. "And one last thing, this one an inducement for your cooperation."

"What? I'll get to scrub the floors of the Elderhaus?"

"The Papa will grant you your fondest desire. Despite his own misgivings, he will give you the aging instruction set containing the biocode to restore your skeletal and endocrinial growth mechanisms."

"He'll let me grow up?"

"To your detriment," the Living Will said, then it climbed down.

The sphinx looked up at her. Its man-face needed a shave. It said:

"Is Nestor not a comforting companion?"

In ancient times, nights were short because Earth spun quickly, young and in a hurry. Now Earth was old and slow, and it was a rare night that Little Girl slept through. But that night she slept until dawn, waking only because Nestor licked her face with his tongue rough as sandpaper. "Off me! That hurts!" she said. He jumped down from her bed. When she wiped her cheek, she came away with a little blood on her knuckles. "Were you going to eat *me*?"

"Are you supposed to meet Mister Alistair?"

"Oh! Shit!"

She jumped out of bed and hurried to her toilet, where she slapped some mending cream upon her cheek. Then she ate a summerfruit and fed Nestor a couple of souls. As they were about to leave, she noticed the floor and walls were scratched and wet in patches. "You woke up the walls too?"

"Does Nestor like to taste new things?" said the sphinx.

They met Alistair upstream from Rust Canyon, at a place called Dismal Columns.

The Columns were outcroppings of stone, conglomerations of rock and fossil and souls fifty or more feet tall, carved from an ancient mesa. There was a forest of them. Little Girl disliked the columns as a soul-source. She was afraid of heights, for one thing; the easy-pickings had been harvested long ago, by her mother and (so it would seem) the Papa. And of the souls that remained, most were distorted and disturbed. But Alistair contended that the distortions could yield souls with the best buzz imaginable.

"Check this one out!" said Alistair. He was twenty feet up one column, roped by the waist to it, a chisel in his hand. He threw something disk-shaped to her. It floated downward, spinning: a soul aerodynamically flattened. The sphinx batted at it, then knocked it down. She thought he would pounce on it, but he retreated from it. "Is Nestor scared?"

She picked it up. A shiver passed through her.

She felt dread and smelled sulfur and saw corpses on spits being turned by walking skeletons.

"Ew," she said, dropping the soul. The bad things vanished. "I don't like this one at all." She'd only seen the corpses for a second, but she was pretty sure one was her.

"Pretty disturbed, hey?" Alistair said.

"Yeah, getting roasted for dinner, that qualifies."

"Roasted? I saw a man with a dog head tear out my heart then weigh it on a scale."

"What is eschatology?" asked Nestor.

"Huh?" Little Girl said.

"I think he's right," Alistair said. "The soul shows the end of the world. Or maybe visions of Hell. What happens to you after you die. You want to use it on your father?"

"Why? It's all one discontinuity for him. He doesn't believe in life after death."

"So? It could freak him out. Scare him enough to at least reconsider."

"I don't know. His imagination doesn't tend that way."

She didn't say a second reason: she didn't want to carry the soul back to her house. Unpleasant moods were bad enough. But she hated to hallucinate.

"Well, what do you want to do?" Alistair looked crestfallen. "Just let him off himself?"

"No, we're here. Let's look some more."

So they searched for buzzy souls, Alistair shimmying high up columns where souls were plentiful, Little Girl on the ground where the souls were mostly gone, concavities in the columns the record of their onetime presence. When she began to despair at finding *any* souls, she persuaded Nestor to let her stand on his shoulders. He whimpered because of his broken leg but was still strong enough to lift her up. She found two buzzy souls. One was charged with contempt or maybe loathing. No good. The other, a blue soul with pink striations, so tingled with embarrassment that her face got warm. Maybe this one—

"Hello!" Alistair cried.

She jumped down from the sphinx. Alistair could see her.

"Little Girl, up here!"

Alistair stood atop one of the columns, waving a soul triumphantly. "Little Girl, are you embarrassed?"

How did he know?

She stepped away from the column and the blue soul.

Could Alistair's soul *read minds*?

Maybe just emotions. That was the consensus they reached after a few minutes' more experimentation, there in the early morning gloom of the Dismal Columns. If you touched it, touched this rubbery black soul mottled with gray thin spots where it had been attached to the top of the column, you would feel the emotion of the person you were looking at, or thinking of. Touching it while looking at Nestor made her feel like there was a feast laid before her after a long fast. Touching it while looking at Alistair made her feel confident.

And when they both touched it while looking at each other, love and pity hit her like a punch.

She broke loose, then looked away from Alistair.

"What it is," he said, after a second, his voice weak and shaking, "is empathy. It amplifies the emotions that you sense naturally in someone else."

"It was like feedback," she said. "So much emotion could tear you apart."

"Well, yeah." He took a deep breath, as if summoning his courage. "Do you want to try it on your father?"

"I guess," she said. "But I don't want to touch it any more."

Alistair carried the soul, wrapped in his T-shirt, his hairless back gleaming with sweat despite the fact that it was still chilly: the T-shirt just partly insulated the soul. He kept apologizing to the sphinx for burdening it with self-awareness. And to Little Girl for letting her father become so unhappy.

Little Girl finally snapped. "Quit saying you're sorry!" She grabbed the soul away from him. She immediately regretted how harshly she had spoken. "I'm sorry," she said.

He nodded. "It's the buzziest soul I've ever found. If your father just touches it for a second, I think he'll change his mind."

But they were worried they would be so overwhelmed by their own sense of empathy, they would be powerless to act.

So they went to Alistair's house, and got an insulating bag. A face, thick-lipped and strong-chinned, was molded in soft bas-relief on the side of the bag. The face was a gauge of the strength of the soul.

After they slipped the soul into the bag, the face's expression went from calm to agonized.

"Is he upset?" said Nestor.

"Better him than us," said Little Girl. It was just an automaton anyway.

That afternoon, they went to see the Papa, Alistair carrying the soul in the insulating bag.

Alistair looked puzzled when Little Girl strode past the elevator door. "Aren't you going to put the sphinx away?"

"No," she said. "He's coming with us."

"Your father will disinherit you for sure if he sees what you've done to it."

"It will be insurance. If the soul doesn't work we can try the sphinx on the Papa."

"What do you mean?"

"The Papa wouldn't trust me to take care of the cloudmind. He couldn't kill himself then."

"Is Nestor the ace in a hole?" the sphinx said. But Alistair looked dubious.

They walked the Corridor of Heredity, which connected the Tower to the Elderhaus. Little Girl was nervous. She had not seen the Papa for over three years. She studied the patterns in the floor tiles—double helixes of DNA, strands of Turing microcode. She used to imagine her own genes were on display here, and if she just memorized the tiles, she could figure out how to make herself get older.

The rattle of the dolly wheels against the tiles was annoying.

Last time she had seen the Papa it had been her birthday. Her sixty-fourth birthday. He gave her a sweetsponge with ten birthday candles to blow out. Ten! "Why don't you just keep me in a time-lock!" she had shouted, letting her long blond tresses fall upon the candle flame.

But the flames were too cold to ignite her hair; the Papa had chosen low heat candles.

She'd shaved her head the next day.

Remembering her anger made her angry again. She yanked the door to the Elderhaus open so violently something popped in her shoulder.

"What's that sound?" Alistair asked.

A woosh . . . woosh, regular and gentle. "The Papa's respirator. It's louder than it used to be."

They walked through the sitting room, with its chairs of stone and its plush recliners. There was a faint odor, like flowers just beginning to decay.

"Does Nestor smell something good to eat?"

The sphinx had smelled the pantry. Left-ways and down a corridor. A half-opened door revealed empty shelves, bare meat hooks swinging from the ceiling, and a refrigerator that had evidently gone mental and perverse: it was not cold but so hot Little Girl could feel its warmth from twenty feet away.

Nestor started to push his dolly in the direction of the pantry, but Little Girl waved the wand and said, "Not lunch time yet."

They went down a long corridor with a twist.

They reached her father's room.

Suddenly she was of two minds, two inclinations. One was to knock. The other was to turn and run. That other was sweaty, loud, and strident.

"Well?" Alistair said.

"Goddamn," she said. She rapped the brass ring on the door as hard as she could. The door swung open.

The smell hit them first.

Rich, organic, like a thousand roses in a bathtub; sweet but rotting.

And then the Papa was gradually revealed.

You couldn't see the Papa all at once. He was too big. You saw him in stages, in glimpses. Here a shoulder as big as a bed, there an elbow like a marble buttress, there his side high as her chin. He was pale white and lumpy. Gradually as they moved counterclockwise around the room, she was able to apprehend the whole person. He was naked and nearly filled the room. And it was a big room, the largest in the Elderhaus.

"Giantism?" Alistair asked.

It was true; he'd grown more large than fat.

He lay face down, supported from the ceiling by great rubber straps. An external set of mechanical lungs, big frilly sacks, inflated and deflated atop his back like badly positioned gills. Their *woosh-woosh* made a gentle breeze.

His head was in the dream closet: a structure like a freestanding wardrobe. It was painted glossy black, with yellow stars and blue half moons. She had painted it when she was young. When she was young, the Papa had fit in the dream closet completely.

"He's working with the cloudmind?"

"Looks like it," she said.

Nestor went to sniff one of the lumps: a little hand, pink and delicate, emerging from the neck as though to shake.

"This could be our chance to do the soul," Alistair said, but before he had even opened the insulating bag, the Papa pulled his head out of the dream closet.

"My Sasha!"

It took her a while to respond, she was so fascinated by his head. His face had grown, but unevenly: his ears were as huge as saucers, lobes nearly dragging on the floor; his nose was like a trunk, curling past his chin; the wattles hanging from his jawline looked like goiters. Otherwise, his head looked very much as it had three years ago. The strangest thing about it was that it was not of the same scale as the body; it was human—not whale-sized. "I'm Little Girl."

"The name du jour. And you are Alistair, still?"

Alistair said yes.

The Papa's blue eyes were bright and animated. He looked at the sphinx. "And what do we have here?"

Little Girl warned the sphinx to stay quiet with a wave of her wand. "It's an automaton."

"It's not sentient?" the Papa asked.

"No."

"How can you date a machine?"

"I'm not," she said. "I just said that to mess with the Living Will's head."

Usually that sort of revelation would inspire the Papa to give a lecture. But he seemed in good spirits today. "Excellent!" His tone of voice was almost jolly. "You have come to pay your last respects to me before I die?"

"We were hoping we could change your mind."

"Change? Really?" The Papa laughed, revealing teeth that had grown too big for his mouth. "I'd think just seeing me would change *your* minds, rather. I'm a human bestiary! I have feet growing out of my belly and vermiform appendixes sprouting from my shoulder blades! Neoplasms grow from my head instead of hair! Eyes coil around my vertebrae like strings of fleshy popcorn! Sometimes alien chordates burst forth from my buttocks! Do you know how much that *hurts*?"

"Cool," Little Girl said, slightly nauseated. She could see stiff hairs, colored green like seaweed, just beginning to emerge from his scalp.

"No, not cool. Painful, grotesque, humiliating!" He started to tear. But even his tears were weird. They were long and fibrous and as one fell from his cheek, Little

Girl was able to catch it. It was a string of numbers, tiny saline precipitates: a code or program. "You hope to sentence me to continue this life of pain?"

"Well, I—" she began.

"We have something that would help your pain," Alistair said.

"Great! What?"

"Right here." Alistair reached into the insulation bag. Even as he pulled the soul out, his face went from confident to—

The sphinx lunged forward and gobbled down the soul.

"Nestor!" Alistair shouted.

"Do I have empathy for your condition?" Nestor said to the Papa.

The Papa's eyebrows made an obtuse angle. "Do you *what*?"

"Does Nestor know how much you miss your wife sixty years later?"

"How could you know *that*?"

"Does Nestor know how your life has become unbearable?"

"How could you know *anything*?"

"Does Nestor understand how you wish to save your daughter from a similar fate?"

Little Girl shot an electromagnetic bolt at Nestor, and the sphinx fell down asleep.

"What was that?" the Papa asked. "Why was it asking questions?"

"Sphinxes are eternally doubting," Alistair said. "Even of their own perceptions. They express their uncertain view of reality by making even their statements riddles."

"I mean—" The Papa looked at Little Girl. "What did you do to it that it could be asking about empathy?"

"That was a buzzy soul it ate," Alistair said. "The buzziness kindled a kind of self-awareness."

"Nonsense! Sasha—Little Girl—did you enhance this sphinx?"

Her heart felt like it might pump itself right out of her throat. No backup plan, no ace in the hole now. She said, "Its soul-cradle was empty. So we put a soul in."

"You gave it self-awareness?"

"Well, *more* self-awareness. It was semi-autonomous."

A shiver went down the Papa's long body, the feet beneath his belly kicking as if reflexively. The angle between his eyebrows narrowed. "Sasha. Didn't I prohibit you from doing that? Didn't I warn you against it? Hasn't the Living Will explained to you how I experimented with souls and moods as a young man, and now am paying the price with the blooming of my body? Do you not know how important it is to me to keep you from the same fate?"

She toed the sphinx's tail. "Maybe I'd stop experimenting if you'd stay alive."

"No. I don't bargain. My daughter: another disappointment. Another thing to grieve for."

"Grieving? You're grieving?"

"Of course," the Papa said. "You have violated the terms of my will. You will not inherit my estate."

She shrugged. "I didn't want it anyway."

"And most grievous of all, you will not receive the aging instruction set."

She stared at him, open-mouthed. Whatever grief she had been feeling seemed to melt away in the fires of her rage. "You're not going to let me grow up? What happened to being sorry for keeping my body young?"

"I am sorry that I let your brain age but the rest of your body stay the same. I'm not sorry for keeping you at ten. Ten is the ideal age."

She pointed her wand at him. Maybe if she blasted him with an EMG pulse, she could disrupt the biotronics of his breathing apparatus. But Alistair stepped in front of her, and said, "Sir, how can you let yourself die, if she's violated the terms? Who will be responsible for dealing with the cloudmind?"

"She's demonstrated she's too irresponsible for that role."

"*You're irresponsible!*" she said. "You're the one killing himself! You're the one giving up the duty of caring for the cloudmind!"

"On the contrary," the Papa said. "I prepared for this contingency. After I am dead, I will care for the cloudmind myself."

He was going to upload. Skyloft. The Living Will explained it as they watched. Watched scurrying automatons cutting a door in the wall of the Elderhaus. Other machines lifting him onto the many-wheeled flatbed. The slow drive that took half the afternoon. The candy-cane stripes of the Living Will's bell-bottoms. The Papa's brain would be vaporized, disassembled, thought traces and soul circuits translated into gaseous ions, organized magnetic charges capable of constantly reinvigorating themselves. Then skylofted to the stratosphere where the magnetic record of the Papa's consciousness would attempt to soothe and coddle the cloudmind.

"But you won't be dead, then!" Little Girl said. She was sitting on the front edge of the flatbed, Nestor beside her curled asleep, the Papa's head above her. The Papa was resting his cheek against a closet-shaped box much like the dream closet, but different. It had no moon-paintings on it, for one thing. It would kill him, for the other.

His long nose dangled within reach of her hands.

He said, "The skyloft will destroy my brain." His voice was no longer jolly. "I will be dead."

"You'll be alive in the stratosphere," she said.

"Something else will be up there. I'll be dead."

"But it will be *you*," she said.

Alistair, sitting cross-legged on the flatbed, said: "It's just like the forty Hertz binding cycle of the brain: you stop *being* forty times a second while your neurons reconfigure. It's just like if you sleep: you wake up and it's still you."

"Biology is everything," the Papa said. "Different physical substrate, different person, different self."

She ran her fingers through the U of hair that the balding sphinx still had. "But up there. It will be a copy of *you*. It will think just like you."

"The copy can worry about itself," the Papa said. "I will be dead like your mother."

She didn't shout at him but petted the sphinx instead.

Maybe she was feeling a little of the empathic soul from it.

An hour before sunset, they reached the Gash Peculiar. From the high cliff, they could see Alistair's house on the same side of the Gash, a mile off and looking like a piece of banana pressed into the cliffwall. The automatons, brush-footed, sturdy-limbed, rabbit-sized, pulled the flatbed to within a few inches of the edge, so close that a rock or two fell into the Gash. The automatons locked the flatbed into place.

Once the Papa's mind had been skylofted, his body would be dumped into the Gash Peculiar.

"Why?" she asked.

"Is Little Girl disturbed?" asked the sphinx, who had finally awakened.

"I don't see how she could be," the Papa answered. "It's just this tumor-ridden body that will be dropped in, not the self."

Little Girl blinked, eyes watering. "I'm not a *monster*."

"Ah, but I am," said the Papa. "And the funeral arrangements will be simpler this way."

"Damn you," she said. Her chest was hot with anger and grief. Grief? "Damn you for being selfish."

"I'm sorry," the Papa said. "You're right. I should be damned. I have been damned. What else is my blooming but a sentence of damnation?"

So speaking, tears dripped from his eyes and his nose.

"Is Nestor unbearably sad?" said the sphinx.

The Living Will had been overseeing the automatons while they prepared the dumping mechanism on the flatbed. Now he turned his attention to the group at the front. "Will you be kind enough to come over here? We're about to begin the procedure."

"Screw you," Little Girl said, but she let Alistair lead her off the flatbed, Nestor limping behind them.

She sat with Nestor and Alistair about twenty feet away from the flatbed. The Living Will crouched near her father's head, making adjustments to the skyloft box. The ground creaked and pebbles fell as the Living Will moved. She wondered if the cliff might collapse beneath the combined weight of him and the Papa, and both of them fall into the Gash. But almost as if the Living Will had read her mind, he looped a few guy-wires through his belt loops, then had a pair of little automatons stake the other ends of the guy-wires into the ground a safe distance from the edge.

"I'm going to stop this," Little Girl said.

"Go for it," said Alistair.

She waved the wand at the Living Will, and set off an EMG blast. The Living Will blinked. "Oh, no," he said. He took a couple of steps toward them. She sent off another blast. He blinked again as his trousers turned spangled. As she was about to send a third blast, he grabbed the wand from her. He broke it across his knee.

"Hey man, that was mine," Alistair said.

"I will remunerate you, with an object of equivalent value," said the Living Will. Then he returned to the skyloft box.

"Crap," Little Girl said.

"Does Little Girl grieve for her father?"

"I don't get why," she said. She rubbed Nestor's glabrous head. "He's right. He'll be copied up there."

Alistair looked thoughtful. "Intellectually you can separate his mind from his body. Emotionally you can't."

"Fuck," she said.

"Is Nestor full of sadness, too?" The sphinx leaned its head against her shoulder. A minute later the Living Will stepped back from the skyloft box.

The Papa looked at her, trunk nose twitching.

"Sasha," he said, "I do love you."

Her heart felt as though it would break.

"Whatever," she said.

Now the Papa put his head into the skyloft box, and the Living Will lowered a sliding panel at the back of the box. The panel was polyformous; it reshaped its edges to snugly fit the Papa's neck. A pain went through Little Girl. It felt as though the Papa was gone, and all that was left was this white whale of a body, with buttocks like sofas, appendages like paddles, green cilia for hair.

"The Papa left me a long time ago," she said.

Alistair, sitting on the other side of the sphinx, squeezed her shoulder.

"Does Nestor feel all alone?"

She couldn't comfort the sphinx. She was too deep in her own misery. She watched the Living Will step back from the flatbed and pick at his tinsel mustache as he considered the Papa. With the sun just setting, the Living Will was like a dark cardboard cutout against the peach and pinkish sky.

"Let's charge it," she said. "Let's wreck it." But she spoke so quietly Alistair said, "Huh?"

"Let's—"

The skyloft box began to buzz as the Living Will took another step back.  
It was starting.

Nacreous light pulsed across the gunmetal gray surface of the box. The buzz pitched higher, changed first into a whine and then into a keen, a sound painful enough that they covered their ears with their hands (or paws in Nestor's case). Then as a shudder passed through the Papa, coxcombs on his spine and nipples on his thighs vibrating, she understood the procedure was beginning.

The scanning procedure. She knew about it. From the top of the brain, the post-neo cortex, to the bottom, the brainstem, the box sliced horizontally, progressing down in millimeter increments. Gamma rays, ultra-high energy, their wavelength a mere Planck unit, converged inside the brain, mapping neurons down to atoms, atoms down to protons, neutrons, and electrons. The measurement was so faithful and so fine-grained that the tissue was destroyed utterly. Down the vertical axis transverse slices were taken, post-neo cortex to neo-cortex, paleocortex to archicortex, subcortex to thalamus, cerebellum to brainstem. Successively more ancient and primitive structures were captured, a billion year history of brain evolution read backward.

The dozen feet hanging from the abdomen kicked and shuffled desperately.

"Could you close your eyes? Tell me!" said Nestor, who was sobbing.

She wondered at which point exactly the Papa's consciousness came to an end; probably well before the brainstem was reached.

The big body went limp, feet going still, coxcombs, gills, and fins relaxing. Curiously, an arm that grew out of the Papa's right knee began to flex, as if to flaunt its muscular bicep. Maybe a brain, some isolated lump of nervous tissue, had innervated the arm.

Then it went still.

"We're done," said the Living Will. He pressed a button on the skyloft box. The back panel rose and the Papa's head flopped down. It was steaming. Blood trickled from its eyes and ears. The Living Will reached into the box and pulled out a dark mass about the size of a sourdough roll. Or more aptly, a cannonball.

The Papa's soul. His entire self recorded into a five-dimensional array of magnetic monopoles, said array protected and insulated by a dark composite shell. The Living Will said to her, "Would you like to hold it for a moment?"

"Sure," she said.

"Does she want to keep the Papa's soul for herself?" said Nestor.

"No—" she said, but too late. The Living Will shook its head, then returned the soul to the skyloft box. Little Girl wished Nestor could be discreet.

The Living Will closed the back panel on the skyloft, then said:

"Ashes to ashes, rust to rust, he who is father to Sasha and Minister to the Cloud-mind, commands his consciousness and spirit to the sky."

With a roar, the top third of the skyloft began to rise.

It rose on a column of flame, a steady orange brilliance that blinded her for a moment. When she could see again, the skyloft had risen eighty or a hundred feet, and cast a cone of light bright as daylight on the Papa's body and the Living Will, whose mirror eyes seemed to glow. When the skyloft was a little higher, Little Girl gasped. The cilia atop the Papa's head were burning like candles.

"At least treat him with some respect!" she said. She ran over to the flatbed and put her hands on the Papa's head, extinguishing the flames. Up close, she saw his eyelashes were singed.

His head felt fever-hot, from the flames or maybe the scanning procedure.

She pulled his eyelids closed.

Even though there was no brain to make those eyes see.

"Is Little Girl sad?"

"Leave me alone," she said, but she let the sphinx nuzzle her hip. Far above them, the skyloft was a bright star in the night sky, seeming motionless. Then it burst open, blooming brightly red-orange-green like a firework. The Papa's mind had made it.

He was spread across the stratosphere.

The Living Will said, "You'll want to step away."

"Screw you, machine."

But a minute later, she and Nestor were back with Alistair.

They sat on big stones made of crushed and petrified human shoes: cross trainers and high-heeled boots.

They watched the Living Will finish with the Papa.

He had the automatons cut loose all the rubber straps that had been supporting the Papa. The Papa's big body slumped to the floor of the flatbed; she winced as his head fell down as if he were praying, forehead to the floor, trunk of a nose kinked into an S-shape. It would have hurt if he'd been alive.

Then the Living Will activated a control, and the flatbed rose up at one end like a ramp.

Slowly at first, huge inertia to overcome, the Papa slid down the ramp. Then fast, faster, great creakings in the vehicle, cracks as gantries were snapped off, and face-first the Papa fell down into the Gash Peculiar.

Boulders at the edge tumbled thunderously after him.

But there was no other noise as his body fell.

They sat on the edge of the cliff, staring down into the Gash Peculiar. A half-moon, swaddled with storm-clouds, had risen. It lit the opposite cliff-face a ghostly blue but did not penetrate deeply into the Gash. "Such a big fat man," Little Girl said. "You'd think he would have gotten stuck in the Gash. But there was nothing . . ."

No splash, no lightshow, no chorus of the angels.

Alistair looked down. "Well, like you said, it wasn't really *him*. Just his body."

"Yeah," she said.

"Actually, it *was* more than his body that fell."

The Living Will had moved closer to them. He had stooped down. His mirror eyes reflected the Moon.

"Who asked you?" Little Girl said.

"Your father asked me to explain this contingency. He deeply regrets the course of action that was necessitated by your violation of the terms of your inheritance."

"He regrets throwing himself into the Gash?"

"He regrets—or I should say, regretted—that the memory went with him when he fell."

"What memory?" Little Girl asked. "What do you mean?"

"The memory that contained the instructions for allowing you to grow."

"Grow? You mean grow up?"

"Yes."

Heart thump-thumping. "What do you mean—"it went with him?"

"A memory vial was within him."

"He'd ingested it?"

"It was surgically implanted in his sacrum. Had you kept to the terms of the will, I would have removed it and given it to you."

"You bastard," Little Girl said. She stood up and charged at him. It would be so fine to knock him over.

But she couldn't even move him.

Running into his leg was like charging into a tower of souls turned to stone.

\*\*\*

The rain started falling as they walked toward Alistair's house. Skin-numbing cold, wind-swept painful, it drenched them, soaked their clothes, gathered soggy in their shoes. It made walking tricky so they dared not get close to the cliffedge. It made sight difficult so Alistair's house was just a smudge of light and the Gash Peculiar a solid purple wall. Worst, it made even breathing hard, for the rainwater was thick with moods, infused with sadness, shot-through with distress; it hurt to work her lungs when they seemed bound by barbed wire to terrible thoughts, to the memory of the dead Papa's head flopping down, to stories of genocide and suns gone supernova, to the countless tragedies of the billion billion souls who formed the Earth's crust but which were otherwise forgotten.

"We can maybe synthesize ... growth hormone," Alistair said, or sobbed. She found no assurance in his words.

"Does Nestor feel like he's been buried alive?"

"At least you're honest," she told the sphinx. Then she said: "Unlike the Papa! He's failing! He can't control the cloudmind, not at all!"

"No," Alistair said. "It's not the cloudmind making this rain. It's your *father*."

"No, it's not."

"But it is," Alistair said.

And in a voice devoid of joy, Nestor said: "He is crying for you."

Then she swore, and swore, and swore, so she would not cry herself. ○

## ENTANGLEMENT, VALENTINES AND EINSTEIN

he will love you

the second time he meets you

the third time he knows you

though and because

before this

he will not have known of you at all

when you meet him the first time

you may already have loved him forever

or not ever, even

if he were the last man

in the known universe

and parts of Poughkeepsie

but you will not know any of this

until you DO meet

but once this happens

the action

of keeping him at a distance

would require a court order

and change nothing

—W. Gregory Stewart



# WASTER MERCY

Sara Genge

Sara Genge's latest story is part of her *Children of the Waste* series that began with "Godtouched" in *Strange Horizons*, and continued with "Shoes-to-Run" (*Asimov's*, July 2009) and "Malick Pan" (*Asimov's*, April/May 2010). She tells us, "These tales are loosely set in a wild expanse outside Paris that is scarred by ecological disaster and social decline. The stories occur in different areas of the Waste, each with its own ecosystem and social structure, and in different periods in time. Survival is a strong connecting thread as well as the idea that sometimes it's the society that's sick and not the individual—and child psychopaths appeal to me for some reason."

The zum-barrier closed behind Brother Beussy, casting a silver glow on the darkened road. The headlights came alive with two blinks and a flicker, but the shivering lights were barely enough to see. When the city magnetics failed, the skid bucked and landed on its wheels. Brother Beussy struggled for control, wondering if he'd ever get used to the bumpy feel of a vehicle in actual physical contact with the road. The old hybrid had cost a fortune, but it was the only means of transportation in the Waste where nano was too scarce to coat the roads and maintain a decent magnetic polarity.

Eastwards, pinkish light swept in under the Rim and spread shadows under the mengue bushes and tamarisk trees. The Rim looked solid enough, but it was only the visual effect created by the edge of the nanobot haze that coated Paris. Out here, the haze was too thin to keep out most of the sun's radiation. Beussy could protect himself against the light, but the gamma rays must be, as of now, pummeling his DNA. It was a sacrifice, and one worth making. His absolution lay hidden among the trash, red dust, and glare of the Waste.

"Warning: sunrise. Warning: sunrise." The skid console announced. At dawn and dusk, the sun shone directly under the dome, blinding and burning. Beussy swore like a Waster, hit the emergency stop, and skidded to a halt. Side flaps of woven polymer rose to cover his legs. Beussy yanked the hood out of the rear compartment and threw it over himself.

He waited, cocooned in his green bubble. He had been warned not to look, but slivers of light seeped in between the cape and the side flaps. *Cracks*. He damned himself for missing them and pulled the pieces of fabric together as best he could, hoping the gaps weren't critical.

Beussy dug his head into his arm and prayed for his eyesight. An hour later, the skid declared it was safe, and he emerged from cover.

Brother Beussy had never seen so much light.

He had always thought of blindness as life in the dark, but now he saw that life in the light could be more intimidating. When his eyes finally adjusted, he laughed with relief.

He kept going. It was too dangerous to linger this close to the city after sunrise. The Wasters would soon be out and there'd be patrols on the lookout for new penitents to rob of their gear.

Brother Beussy accepted that there was a high probability of dying in the Waste. Lead poisoning, cholera, radiation—these were common threats. There was no shame in dying such a death, having his body disintegrate among the dust and trash, his grave unmarked save for the fluorescent chits that the wind blew into the base of burial mounds. If he could live as a Waster and die one of them, his life would have meaning and his soul would go to his Maker in peace.

But a violent death brought on by his foreignness was tantamount to martyrdom. Acclimatizing was his goal, and it carried powerful religious connotations. The Order shunned cultural colonialism, and Brother Beussy had spent years studying the biological urges that underlined the impulse to convert others to one's culture, or else. He'd been trained to recognize the signals, the way his mind would try to trick him into confusing his private morality with universal good; what was right, with righteousness.

In this trip, Brother Beussy sought neither to preach nor to teach, although he was willing to do both. His job was simple but immense; he had only his soul to care for, but the breadth of that endeavor brought him to his knees. He could fail by refusing change, but that would be a private failure and he could always try again. Martyrdom was the only permanent failure the Waste offered, and Brother Beussy would do anything to avoid it.

The terrain north of Paris was hilly. The skid creaked and jittered over the tufts of grass and pebbled cement. The land was crackled like an old man's arm, dry and jaundiced from the sun, with oil stains like black-and-blue marks and liver spots of rotting Kikuyu grass.

By mid-afternoon he'd covered only twenty kilometers.

He saw the nails on the road, too late. The wheels hissed and deflated. The hub clanged and the handlebars yanked out of the priest's hands. It was a low speed crash, but Brother Beussy was impotent to stop it. The skid swerved off the road and hit a petrified trunk. For a second, Beussy thought that the worst was over. But the skid tilted and fell with the certainty of a quarter-ton machine and Brother Beussy went down with it.

He heard bone crack. Pain squeezed the air out of his lungs.

He prodded the machine, but the pain in his calf kept him from attempting anything drastic. Back in the city, it had taken three grown men to lift the skid up from its side. He had no hope of lifting it now. He knew he was trapped.

His mind raced through the options. As far as he could tell, there were none. He had prepared for this moment, he told himself. He had trained. There was no help coming, not from the city. He would die here, today if a predator found him, tomorrow if he bled out slowly and ran out of water.

Four deep breaths helped him focus. He was in the Waste. The thought cleared his mind. There was no shame in dying from the elements. This wasn't murder; it wasn't martyrdom. He hadn't expected the end to come this soon, but he'd known all along that he was not going back. Only weak missionaries admitted defeat and returned

to the city. Not he. He'd find his Creator in this desert of the soul or not at all.

The pain cut into his mind like a laser, separating his faith from its trappings, truth from political consensus. Beussy had never been so lucid. His life was laid out before him, freed from lies, conceits, and theological double-talk. He saw his naked sins spread out on the table, numbered, classified.

He had thought he understood confession. He had repented often enough. Now, he saw that he'd been lying even as he intoned *Mea Culpas*. His sin was pride—but he'd always known, hadn't he? His pride cracked like a nut and revealed a pale soul, blinking its eyes in the light.

In awe, he realized that shame hadn't replaced pride. He forgave himself as he had struggled all his life to forgive those who had offended him. His sins were a part of him, rough diamonds, proof of his utter humanity. They could not touch him now.

Brother Beussy hadn't realized that his eyes were closed. When he opened them, he saw the sky between the branches of a mengue bush. The sun beat on each leaf, insisting it toughen up or die.

His eyes had seen; his ears had heard. He was a witness and he couldn't imagine a greater honor, a greater blessing. The light of creation was blinding and Brother Beussy cried from the joy of it.

The child angel approached the skid cautiously. Brother Beussy held his breath, not wanting to scare it away. Its skin was a leaden gray and it weaved its way through Beussy's vision like a ghost, entering and exiting on its own terms. It limped, or rather, loped at amazing speed, using the wooden cane more as a jumping pole than as a crutch. The cherub shook his head wearily and sighed. Brother Beussy chuckled at the adult gesture and the child jumped back.

"I won't hurt you," the priest said.

The child kicked the console away from Beussy's hands.

"I know," he said, and started patting Beussy down. The search produced a cheap metal compass, a snack, some currency and a couple of chits, which the child pocketed.

This was no angel.

"How do you prefer I kill you?" the boy asked. "I can leave you alive until Chief and his men come to take the skid, but I'd think you'd rather die now than later. That must hurt," he said, pointing at the leg trapped under the skid.

He put it so clearly that Beussy almost forgot to beg for his life.

"Please," he whispered.

The boy sighed and shook his head, knelt next to Beussy and caressed his hair. "If it were up to me, I'd keep you, but last time, mother got real angry. Besides, we don't have food for a slave. And none of Chief's men are going to want you. The leg." It was self-explanatory.

"Not martyrdom! No, I won't die that way. God, not that way!" Beussy moaned and struggled. The skid creaked but didn't budge and he swooned from the pain. He shook himself awake and tried to dig his leg free, but the ground was hard-packed. The quartz dust bit the flesh under his fingernails until it bled.

In the background, he was dimly aware of the boy circling the skid, searching for unprotected pockets.

The pain was too much. The fear was too much. Brother Beussy stopped and covered his face with his hands. Blood trickled down his cheeks.

"Where's the key to the container in the back?" The boy asked.

"Don't kill me."

"I'll do it fast. Chief's men won't be so kind."

"Let me die on my own! What is it to you?"

The boy considered this for a few seconds and then shook his head. "It'll take you

forever. Another scout might find you and then Chief won't give me my part." He motioned towards his paralyzed leg. "I have to move twice as fast, search twice as hard, and be twice as smart as any other scout just to stay in the militia. Can't do." The boy took out a multi-blade knife and went for the priest's left wrist. The kid was fast and kept coming back, but Beussy fought back. His fist glanced off the boy's temple.

The boy yapped and jumped back. "I was doing you a favor!" He started collecting stones. "You'll die, dammit."

"You'll never find the keys," Brother Beussy said. "If you do find them, you won't recognize them and you won't know how to use them. The skid will be useless to you and you'll never manage to open the back container. It's made from a woven metal polymer."

The first rock landed on Beussy's forehead, regardless. "The skid will be good for parts and I'm guessing a blowtorch will open the container . . ." the boy said. The second rock cracked Beussy's eyebrow.

"Wait! For God's sake, won't you listen?" Brother Beussy blinked away the blood in his eye. "This Chief of yours—he'll take most of my gear, right? He'll give you the dregs. If you can open the back container you can take some of the stuff in there. There's a couple consoles, some raw nano." The boy's eyes widened. "Yes, very valuable. If you don't get too greedy, Chief won't even suspect most of it was there."

The boy looked pensive, passing a stone from hand to hand.

"Tell me how to open the back and I'll give you until tomorrow. The hyenas will find you," he said.

Brother Beussy rummaged through his hidden inner pockets for a translucent chit one centimeter across. Thank God the boy had missed it. "Insert it into the slot, flick the switch on the right, and tell me when you've finished. It's voice activated."

The boy did as he was told.

"Rabindranath Tagore," said the priest. His voice was weary. The container clicked open and the musky smell of bionano wafted out.

At sunset, Brother Beussy heard the hyenas gathering. He pulled the cape out of the skid and wrapped himself in it. He didn't know why he bothered. Blindness might be a blessing when the hyenas got him.

The hyenas didn't bark during sunset. Beussy suspected they had curled up to protect their eyes in layers of fur and flesh. Why was it that all vile creatures could withstand the sun? When the end of the world arrived, Beussy suspected only the hyenas and cockroaches would survive.

He knew immediately when the sun had set. The air around him cooled fast. He consoled himself thinking it would soon be over and that he wouldn't have to endure the cold desert night.

A growl behind him. A howl answered to his left. Beussy muttered a quick Mater Ferissima and prepared himself for death.

Stones flew over his head. The hyenas yelped and limped away. The boy emerged from behind a carbonized conifer and sat by the priest's side.

"Wretched boy! You promised to let me die!"

"I didn't. I promised not to kill you until tomorrow. I want the skid and I'm sure it only opens with your words, like the container. You can't die until you give it to me."

Brother Beussy knew he was being petty, not giving the skid to the boy. But he felt cheated, and not only by the boy. He had given his life to God; he had done everything in his power to excise the instinct to convert from his soul. He had even had an epiphany, for Godsake! Further suffering was unnecessary. The Universe had a wretched sense of humor.

But if he gave the boy the skid, what then? Would the boy break his promise a sec-

ond time and kill him because of misguided compassion?

No. Brother Beussy recognized the fallacy as soon as it entered his mind. The boy hadn't broken his promise; he'd simply interpreted it as a Waster and Beussy had no right to judge him for it. Neither could he judge Waster mercy as misguided. That was cultural supremacy at its worst.

"I must not die a martyr," he said. Expressing his needs in a clear simple way, Waster-like. Beussy berated himself for not thinking about it earlier.

"Explain."

Brother Beussy did.

The boy seemed confused. "Wouldn't you rather die quickly? Your god would understand."

"I would rather not die at all," Brother Beussy confessed. "But if I must die, I would die from the natural elements of the Waste, not martyred by its inhabitants."

"I see," said the boy.

Brother Beussy doubted he did.

"If I take the skid and leave you here to die you won't follow me?" The boy's voice was strident, laced with disbelief.

"No."

"Wow. Cool. Why?"

Brother Beussy struggled to explain about colonialism but although the boy nodded sagely a couple of times, the priest doubted that he understood. The missionary kept on regardless. Each minute he talked brought him closer to dying on his own terms.

"Listen, ah, what's your name anyway?"

"Patrice."

"I'm Beussy. Listen, Patrice. My order—that's the group of people I told you about—they have a great burden of guilt from the past. Actually, we come from several different orders—Jesuits, Dominicans—but why am I telling you this? It isn't important. Anyway, centuries ago, those religious orders used to go to new countries and preach. They did some good, but they also weakened the original cultures so that they could not withstand the soldiers who came after. History has shunned this—but you don't know what history is, do you? Well, let's see how I can explain it . . . Let's just say that people have since decided that converting people was wrong and an order was created to redeem us from that collective sin." The priest was giddy, high on faith and adrenalin. The boy seemed riveted, but his reactions were unpredictable. He laughed randomly, shouted in disbelief at the strangest moments and remained quiet and confused when he should have been angry. None of it mattered. Brother Beussy had his audience and he preached with zeal.

Patrice took a soda can that was hanging from his empty holster, removed the mud plug and offered the missionary a drink. Despite his better judgment, Beussy accepted. This would be the last time he preached and he had to make the most of it.

"Why do you carry that thing around?" Beussy asked, pointing at the useless holster.

The boy was offended. "I got it myself! Chief took the gun, but as long as I wear it, everyone knows I killed a man."

"It is very pretty," Beussy said. He hoped he didn't sound placating.

"Isn't it?" Patrice preened. "I hang it against my left side. That way people don't notice that my left leg is so skinny." His voice dropped; this was a secret. Brother Beussy felt a dull pride at being the repository of this tidbit. He didn't have the heart to tell the boy that his deformity was evident, holster or no. The ground beneath him was beginning to redden. Beussy threw a worried glance at the East.

"Shouldn't you be going? The sun's about to rise."

"You think I'm stupid!" The boy stood up and kicked him. "You cannot trick me, city-scum. I'm smarter than you. I'll stay here until you die and then I'll take your skid and your clothes and your nano. Even the little bits on your hair!" Patrice stomped and puffed his chest, shouting and threatening. Beussy cowered before the rage of the Waste, but a part of his mind kept whispering that the scene was simply too funny. Beussy's lips twitched.

"I didn't mean it! Whatever it was," the priest shouted. The boy smiled, remembered himself, and frowned again. Beussy cowered some more, apologized for everything and nothing. Patrice kept huffing but both of them knew that this had turned into a game.

"I meant for you to protect your eyes. Sunrise is coming in a few minutes," Beussy said. "Here, move under the cover of the skid with me. I promise I won't hurt you—" Beussy realized his mistake, the boy thought of himself as fearsome—"I mean, I won't try to escape!"

Patrice laughed. "There are mountains all around us, fool. By the time the sun rises above them, there's already a bit of dome to protect the eyes. You only have to cover your eyes down in the plains and even then it's enough to cover them with your palms. Only fools peek. Tell me a thing, foreigner. How is it that you city people survive to copulate and have children? You all seem too stupid to breathe."

Brother Beussy sunk back into the nettles. Of course, the mountains. Indeed, he felt like an idiot. But wasn't this what the Waste was about? Learning lessons? Then he remembered his situation and the enormity of it sandblasted through his mind. He glanced at Patrice. Sooner or later, this must come to an end.

The boy picked up on Beussy's mood and his smile dissolved. He offered the priest water and they watched the sun rise, each concentrated on his own thoughts.

It took all of Beussy's courage to keep his eyes open when the sun rose over the mountains. He had never watched a sunrise before. The dome over the city muted the light and all he had seen from inside was the blurry disk of the sun when it was at its zenith, dull like a lesser moon. Nothing in his training had prepared him for this spectacle. He shivered with the leaves in the morning breeze. As the crescent of the sun rose over the mountains, he broke into a jumble of Mater Ferissimas, Credos, and Mea Culpas.

Patrice started singing his own ditties, songs of battle and women. Brother Beussy feared the boy understood the explicit details. They both wound up laughing.

The light was bright, but not searing. Nobody went blind.

"Why did you leave your city?" Patrice asked.

"I told you. My order was founded to atone for the sins of Jesuits—"

"Those men are all dead."

"There are other sins," the priest whispered. "More recent."

"You did not lock us out of the city; your ancestors did," Patrice said.

Beussy stared back in surprise.

"What? You think Wasters don't remember!" Patrice shook his head. "You poor man. You're going to die for something your great-great-granddaddy did." His voice dropped. "I don't even know who my father was . . ."

"Ah, but I've profited from my ancestors' crime. I've lived in comfort and safety every day of my life. Until today, I'd never missed a meal." Spoken here, it was an obscenity, but Patrice didn't bat an eyelash.

"You are a fool, foreigner, but I believe you. I believe you wouldn't try to take the skid back, even if you could," Patrice said.

Not that it mattered, but Beussy was glad to hear it.

"I believe you," he repeated. "I hope I'm not wrong."

The boy scampered off. The land came alive with stashes of hidden ropes and clasps, cleverly concealed under nettles and dry turds. Patrice wove around, lashing, knotting. He used his cane as an arm, a lever, a weight balance. Beussy had never seen such grace. The boy *used* his handicap, letting his limitations guide him to inventive solutions. He prodded the World, teasing Nature to see if she would allow a bit more strength, more bounce, more agility on a single leg.

Brother Beussy watched in awe, not understanding what the boy was doing.

"Now, I need to dig you out. The skid should be suspended."

"But the ropes are so thin!"

"Idiot! There are many of them." Patrice shook his head at Beussy but he smiled as he chopped the earth around the leg with the multi-blade knife. It was hard work. Patrice paused, thought for a second, broke off a blade and handed it to Beussy. The priest started digging.

A couple of hours later they had vacated enough dirt that the priest's leg had sunk below the surface. The skid moved down a fraction of a centimeter. The ropes tensed and the branches creaked but didn't give. The priest mopped his brow and started to inch his leg out, groaning and cursing from the pain.

Patrice looked on with the inscrutable air of a judge.

"Now what?" His foot was free. The pain had led him to believe that his whole leg was crushed to bits, but now he saw that it was only his ankle that was broken. He saw bone.

"I take the skid and the nano."

The priest nodded. "The hyenas will get me, then?"

Patrice lifted both palms up to his face. "No, no, no! Have you no will, man?" He cut a few branches, skinned the twigs off, and placed them besides the priest's leg.

"Don't look." Patrice grabbed the heel of Beussy's boot and pulled. The bones settled in place with a crunch. Beussy managed not to scream, but blood flowed from his tongue. He swallowed fast before the boy could notice.

"Paris is that way," Patrice said after he'd fastened the splint. He sounded weary. Brother Beussy realized that dealing with city folk must be trying. "A normal man should be able to reach the city, but you? I don't know."

"So we part now," Beussy said. He sat up, still in a daze.

"Of course we part . . . As soon as you activate the skid, that is." The boy smiled.

Beussy chided himself for expecting a teary goodbye.

"Aquinas," Beussy said, and showed the boy how to reset the password. Chief would have a hard time stealing the skid after it was coded to Patrice's voice.

"Here, have some water," Patrice ran up to him and handed him a can. Beussy thanked him but the boy didn't leave. Instead he looked the priest up and down, hesitating. He ran a hand through the priest's hair, retrieved the stray nano and pocketed it. Then he cut off the priest's clothes and handed him his own shirt instead. "There, that's better. They won't bother you if you look like a Waster."

Brother Beussy put on the shirt, trying not to think about the flesh that it left uncovered or about the light engulfing his body. Now wasn't the time to fuss about the radiation. His leg throbbed, but he felt playful, alive.

"I should go now," Beussy said, but he stayed to watch Patrice pulley the skid upright. Child's play for a boy that had survived despite all odds.

"You were going," Patrice said. He threw Beussy his cane. "Take it. I'll get another."

The priest turned away, but not before he saw Patrice retrieve a couple of nails from the road. Beussy laughed, realizing what had caused his accident. He didn't blame Patrice. The boy did what he had to do to survive.

He limped south, careful to avoid the roads where he might encounter Wasters. He kept his eyes open, but as far as he could tell, nobody was following. O

# PLANET OF THE SEALIES

Jeff Carlson

After his last story for us ("A Lovely Little Christmas Fire," December 2009), Jeff Carlson returns to *Asimov's* with a futuristic adventure. Best known for his internationally acclaimed Plague Year novels, Jeff's short fiction has also appeared in venues such as *Writers of the Future XXIII*, *Fast Forward 2*, and the recent *Welcome to the Greenhouse* anthology from O/R Books. His next novel is *Interrupt*, a stand-alone thriller out later this year. Readers can find free excerpts, videos, contests, and more on Jeff's website at [www.jverse.com](http://www.jverse.com).

**P**rofessor Michaud had set up camp on the northern slope, which was typically upwind of the site. They wore respirators down inside the excavation—sometimes armor, too—and it was a relief not to wear any gear in their off hours. There was some risk of contaminants if the wind shifted or if an eruption surprised their ferrets, but everyone on the team had been given Level IV gene-mods. They could handle small doses of the gases, dusts, and bacteria that regularly belched up from the pits.

Today the sea wind was thick with the hot, chalk smell of the shore. A woman in orange strode away from the brown prefab camp structures. The land was also brown and the sky, too, was a muddy haze.

Her name was Joanna Andrea Löw. She stretched out both arms as she walked, orange sleeves ruffling, as if to snare or fight the hard gusts. The blasting wind felt similar to the conflict alive inside her.

This was a short trail but it was one Joanna took often because there wasn't anywhere else to go. The eroding shore cliffs were strictly forbidden, the excavation site dangerous for its own reasons, and Joanna was young enough to need to stretch her legs even after a day's work. Since earning her job, she'd taken to spending much of her free time among the field of non-hazardous artifacts Professor Michaud allowed them to remove as the search continued for the real treasure. They knew the purpose of only a few of these items and made a game of guessing the names of the rest—the 10,000 Pound Paperweight, the Hyperdrive, and, among Joanna's favorites, the Make-Me-Blind.

The Make-Me-Blind was probably just a kitchen utensil or mechanic's device, a saw-edged set of tongs that opened to the exact spacing of a person's eyes, but the civilization that had made these tools and trinkets was both alien and unmistakably aggressive. Joanna and her line-mates tried to keep things fun during the meticulous, often tedious dig by inventing ghost stories full of conquest, torture, and weird sex.

She liked the Make-Me-Blind because she could chase her sisters around with it. Most of the other artifacts collected here were impressive hulks they'd lifted in via robot, a Stonehenge of metals and plastics.

Joanna preferred small and intimate things, not unusual for a crèche-raised clone.

The wind sang queerly through the crushed alloy pipework of the Hyperdrive, which they assumed had been an industrial pumping mechanism although it did, with some imagination, resemble an old-fashioned reaction engine.

Joanna rested her fingertips against its bulk, frowning. Then she hurried across the field to a trio of orange bins where the smallest artifacts were kept. From there she continued past to the 10,000 Pound Paperweight. Within a crevice of this deteriorating stonework, Joanna had hidden a tiny, shiny object she called the Diamond.

Why feel guilty? None of these artifacts were coming back with them. None would be studied or even catalogued. Of the twenty-six members on the team, just four had training in archeology, which they used only as another method of predictive analysis. Their sole interest here, the real prize, was any trace of biological material.

Joanna didn't question their mission, but she worried at herself. She was committing deceit and true selfishness, and for what? For nothing. Her so-called Diamond was only a rust-eaten band of iron crushed around a translucent plastic nub. It was garbage—ultimately useless.

Could the deepening change in her be what the matriarch wanted? Her line-mother must have anticipated the influences of this environment, the effects of separation and competition. Why else the system of individual bonuses for each find?

"I wonder," she whispered, holding the Diamond up to catch the murky evening light.

Joanna felt stronger for her new independence. The senior members of the team were an example of what she might become—accomplished, opinionated, self-reliant.

But she wanted to be allowed home again.

"Löw, Löw." Her implant spoke while she held the Diamond at arm's length and she brought it in close to her chest, reacting with shame. Then she understood she was still alone and felt a sharper fear at the emergency call. "Full crew to the pits. Löw, Löw. Full crew to the pits."

Joanna stepped toward the 10,000 Pound Paperweight and tucked her Diamond away again before running back to camp.

The ferrets were in defensive mode and altered their hunt pattern as she approached. Worming over the ground, the lithe, furry cyborgs were briefly attracted to the tremors of her footfalls. One lifted its concave face to her as if doubtful.

Joanna's own uncertainty rose into a blood scream before her implant spoke again. The hardware they'd threaded through her cerebrum before she left the crèche was a communications device on many levels, helping line-mates maintain emotional balance, but this subtle, mostly subconscious process could also be a handicap. Powerful feelings like fear and pain tended to echo between them. Joanna knew there were many wounded, and she imagined the worst before her line-senior explained: "Quake, there was a minor quake, Michaud's reporting casualties inside the dig—"

Joanna hadn't noticed a tremor, but this coast was riddled with faults. It was constantly settling.

Eight figures emerged as she reached camp, tall giants in mechanized armor. Katarine raised one steel glove to Joanna as the knot of them pounded by.

Inside the barracks she found Hel in her underwear, prepping one suit, a second outfit hot with the feeds laid down in order.

"Jump," Hel said. "I'll finish this one."

"No." Joanna shoved her toward the ready armor. If a stronger quake hit, if there were dust or gas eruptions, the suits would be their best protection. Joanna couldn't bear to see Hel at risk. The two of them were laterals, closer than most, and Hel had already delayed too long because of her.

Joanna rushed into her armor as their implants spoke again: "We've got five hurt on top and two buried. It looks tight. Let's put our triage by the shed."

"I'm up," Joanna said the instant she was dressed, adding a signature pulse. She moved toward the door. But she'd done a bad job of placing the feed for her left quadriceps. The leg of her suit dragged, and she strained to compensate.

"Joanna, Hel." That was Louise, their line-senior. "Work your way around on the west rim—there's a chance it might be easier to dig through from that side."

They bounded away from camp. Joanna stumbled once and Hel came back to help her stand, patting at Joanna's arm in her fussy way as if it mattered that Joanna's armor was dirty.

"What's wrong?" Hel asked.

"My left quad's only 80 percent. I'm okay."

They cleared a ravine and two sink holes, but Hel grabbed Joanna before a larger jump. "Wait. Can you hop that far?"

"I'm okay."

Neither of them had approached from the west before. In many places, this rim fell away into the brutal surf. The new perspective heightened Joanna's mute, urgent dread.

It was such a strange land, packed into flat steppes, an artificial mountain that had mostly kept its shape even after centuries of quakes and storms. Only brown weeds grew from the brown dirt—a sterile contrast to the greenery and lush flowers of home. This shore had its own allure but it was a terrible beauty, so much like her Diamond, a dead surface concealing wealth beneath.

Quickly, wordlessly, Joanna and Hel coordinated with the others by grid position and their extensive database of radar scans. The two girls buried in the cave-in had been working Trench Fifteen, which was among the deepest. Recovery efforts would be difficult no matter what angle they tried.

"There's an open rift twenty meters down on my side," Joanna said. "We might save time going through there."

"Let's anchor and get a probe in." Hel knelt in a wide, three-point stance, locking her armor as Joanna crouched beside her, aware of an ache in the ligaments of her hip socket. She grabbed Hel's free arm to better stabilize herself before pushing a wire drill through the surface.

Even away from the cliffs, this place could be treacherous. Professor Michaud often compared the site to an insect mound, a methodical if crude structure, each layer carefully separated from the next but, inexplicably, containing the same hodgepodge of materials. Some had decayed, leaving hollows. Gas vents and fires further disrupted the sediment.

The site was a massive garbage dump, vast enough to swallow Joanna's home colony and six others like it, and her people had discovered ten thousand of these landfills all across Europe, Asia, and North America when they emerged from the ice and tundra of the pole six hundred years ago. Expeditions further south revealed more of the same, a worldwide scarring.

This dump, like so many along the fallen edge of California, leached poisons into the ocean. Other landfills had been found near freshwater drainages, which was idiotic yet appeared typical of the breeder civilization.

No one wondered why they were extinct.

Louise made contact again in a quiet, calming voice. "How's that rift look?" she asked.

"Not good, it's top heavy," Joanna said, concentrating on guiding the drill. She uplinked her radar to Louise. "Do you want us to come over?"

"Stay there. Keep searching. I've already got twelve people standing back until there's more room to work."

Joanna frowned at the number. Twelve? A quick grid check showed that her line-mates had been joined by the remainder of the site crew, the third shift, who'd been asleep.

There were three lines cooperating at this dig in what had been equal numbers of ten before a chemical burn killed three Löw and then a viral infection decimated the Suhoza. Replacements, including Hel and Joanna, had brought the total crew back to twenty-six. The line culture could be superstitious about odd numbers, but the Suhoza were still understrength and it was the Löw and the Michaud who alternated the main work details, so it had been a good bet that one of them would be the next to suffer.

"If I send over two robots," Louise said, "do you think you can dig into that rift?"

"Yes," Joanna said. She felt Hel tense. Her own reaction, excitement, made her strong with adrenaline even though it was followed by guilt. Saving the Michaud girls was no contest. Whoever got to them first wasn't better than anyone else.

"Be careful, cubs," Louise said. "Understood? I just want a second option available if this side doesn't pan out."

The excavation robots were towering, ten-legged spiders, capable of squeezing through narrow holes or extending several legs over a thirty-meter circumference in order to hoist ton-loads of debris. Unlike the ferrets, the spiders weren't cyborgs. They contained no living flesh whatsoever and rarely earned nicknames or affection.

Joanna worked her machine relentlessly, blunting its claws, losing four eyes when she pulled upward too fast and a load disintegrated into shrapnel. Hel was more studious, fishing after the smaller junk that Joanna ignored.

Louise continued to deny them an open link to anyone except herself, shielding them from the Michauds' grief, but Louise could not completely prevent this misery from ebbing through to Joanna and Hel each time she checked in with either or both of them to monitor their progress.

The two girls trapped below hadn't transmitted since the cave-in. Possibly this silence was due to the interference of metals. More likely they were dead.

At first Joanna paid little attention to the garbage as she angled toward the rift. The loose debris was only a frustration. But as ten minutes became fifteen, then twenty-five, her emotions found new focus. Anger.

Her home colony wasted nothing, recycling even their urine to maintain the nitrogen levels in their box farms. The line culture was not only genetically poor. For generations they had overcome energy shortages and cold and isolation. The wealth discarded here was staggering. This same crew of twenty-six could have extracted a city's worth of iron each work-week if transportation costs weren't so great. They had too few spiders, too little fuel, and there were a thousand kilometers between here and home, which meant the colonies struggled while this wealth decayed.

It was wrong. It was hateful.

Their line-mother had taught them to view this immense, upside down grave as a powerful lesson, but over time Joanna had felt that wisdom slowly die in her. To con-

front such waste day after day was irreconcilable with proper thinking. It was as though an entirely new interior landscape had opened inside her.

They had all changed. But Joanna was afraid for herself and so much of what she was experiencing.

She envied the makers of this dump.

"Careful!" Hel swatted Joanna's shoulder, overreacting to a slide. They both drew their spiders out. Hel's machine was pinned for an instant, three legs grinding.

Joanna shook her head. "Okay, we need to start setting the larger pieces as containment walls."

"We need to move further back!" Hel's anxiety cut deeper than her voice, a cold contrast to Joanna's determination.

Joanna resisted when Hel nudged at her again. "No," she said. "This spot is as solid as we've got." She almost didn't ask . . . "Are you okay?"

Louise interrupted on their implants before Hel could answer. "I'm sending over help," Louise said.

*We're doing fine*, Joanna thought, but she kept silent, trying to hide her possessiveness.

"This dig is no good," Hel said. "The upper sediment is manufactured items and the next layer down must have been mostly biodegradable. It's sinking."

"It's our best bet right now," Louise said. "We ran into a corrosive spill over here and getting around it will cost us too much time. We'll start digging from the south, too, but right now you're the farthest ones in."

Joanna and Hel were alone for another six minutes. Their work grew inefficient, uncoordinated, a truth as unsettling to Joanna as the question still turning like a knife in her heart.

*Are you okay?*

Hel's loss of composure was a weakness and a danger, but eight crew approached before Joanna found the courage to speak, because this was not a physical hurt—because she was afraid Hel might ask her the same.

It was normal to feel shock, fear, impatience. Joanna was experiencing worse. She felt resentment and mistrust.

Night came almost in a blink, so unlike the long dusks at the pole. Floodlights preceded the mix of human and spider figures who joined them. The professor herself led the two groups of Michaud and Suhoza. She had been among those injured in the cave-in, suffering chest bruises and a fractured cheekbone, yet she'd foregone medical attention to join the rescue effort.

Watching her, the pride Joanna felt was soothing. The Michaud were well-made and worthy partners.

"Your entry reinforcements are uneven," the professor said, rebuking her, and Joanna only nodded when she might have looked at Hel as if to pass the blame. The professor said, "Why don't you two rest for—"

"No."

"What? Rest for a minute."

"Uh, no, we know this substratum best."

"We have your scans." Professor Michaud walked her machine toward the dig, shrugging four of its legs as well as her own hands in a gesture of dismissal. "Rest."

Joanna turned away, glancing up for the stars but finding only cloud cover. What was happening to her? She'd been right to be concerned. These emotions went against the teachings of the line. To be selfish, to be disobedient, were the hallmarks of breeder thinking, especially in the face of trauma, when a line was meant to close into a circle.

Louise would know what she was feeling through her implant. At the moment, Joanna's turmoil might be mistaken as stress. But Louise would know.

Joanna limped away from the Michaud and was pleased when Hel hurried after her, no matter how she'd been feeling toward her sister. Joanna put one hand on Hel's arm and was rewarded with a small, brittle smile.

"I'm not tired, are you?" Joanna asked.

Hel shook her head.

Joanna smiled back at her. "Let's run a wider sweep in case they need more options," Joanna said.

"Stay with me," Hel pleaded.

"Yes."

They leaned close for comfort as they marched their spiders outward in a semi-autonomous stop-and-scan, their visors flickering with radar and thermal displays. Twice Joanna leaned past Hel to watch the Michaud complete the dig, then drop four spiders into the rift.

"Oh!" Hel flinched and said, "Line-senior?" Her tone was almost embarrassed. "Look at my radar! I've located a huge vein of organics."

Jealousy pushed through Joanna's already crowded head, and she hesitated before joining the link to Hel's spider.

"Excellent work," Louise said. "That's industrial."

"It's, um, I'm estimating two thousand plus," Hel said, which Joanna thought was conservative. Based on the size of the twisting cubic area highlighted in the scan, Joanna's own guess exceeded four thousand. Even if the smaller number was accurate, this find would be among their best.

"What are you doing so far from your dig?" Louise asked, both stern and pleased.

*My idea, Joanna thought. This sweep was my idea.*

"Joanna wanted to make sure we weren't missing a better recovery route," Hel said. She was eager to share the bonus, and Joanna clenched her teeth in self-reproach.

Everyone gathered above the rift as the professor's team unearthed their missing girls, but in the night, in the rarely moving cross of floodlights, it was easy to find a shadow. Joanna stood in semi-darkness.

The casualties wore only respirators and shoulder mecha, which hadn't been enough to protect them. Joanna's emotions were too deep to catalogue when the Michaud brought up two torn, bloody corpses, even though these women were lighter in coloring and slimmer than the black-haired Löw. Death had become uncommon in the line culture as they mastered their genetic codes, and violence was unknown, and Joanna could not have been less prepared for gore and bone.

In some odd way she felt honored, even calm.

Hel trembled beside her. Hel was gripped by a more primal reaction, and yet the Michaud and the Suhoza seemed to share Joanna's mood, carrying the bodies with slow grace.

Standing in the shadows was no protection, of course. Louise and Katarine found Joanna by homing in on the signal generated by her implant.

As the two seniors approached, Hel left Joanna's side before anyone spoke, desperate for whatever physical contact could be had despite their armor. "Line," Hel murmured. Louise and Katarine both repeated the greeting, embracing her.

Joanna joined them a moment too late and worried again at this visible mistake.

"Walk with us to your find," Louise said.

"I—" Hel was still shaking. When she moved her head from side to side, *no*, it looked like a larger spasm.

The slightest of glances passed between Louise and Katarine. Then Katarine brought Hel closer to herself, both calming her and turning her away from Joanna.

"I'll show you," Joanna said quietly. She didn't want to leave the group, but judgment was inevitable.

Their foursome split. Hel and Katarine stayed near the Michaud as Louise and Joanna walked away. Underbellies split open with lights, two spiders paced ahead of them, slaved to their movements. One dazzling array of floodlights loped forward smoothly but the other jerked and then swayed as Joanna looked back at the human silhouettes gathered in bent, heavy postures of mourning.

More spiders hunched above Hel's find, mapping the chaotic sediment layers but not digging. The lines did not, could not, trust machines so completely.

A culture that had survived only by tinkering with its very biology was also one intensely sensitive to change. They could be as hostile towards it as their own hyper-immune systems were towards infection. With a total population of six thousand, her line allowed no room for difference—or freedom.

Joanna walked after Louise cautiously, not trying to protect her strained hip but so steeped in thought that each step was a great process. She recounted each of her failings today, her head swarming with memory and regret.

Their line-mother had celebrated Joanna's childhood skills as a gardener, encouraging her to experiment with otherwise useless blossoms because doing so increased her knowledge of selection and breeding. That had been the start of Joanna's ambition, but always the lesson was one of care and control.

Always the line sought to preempt risk to itself.

Joanna's reverie broke as Louise led her into the midst of the spiders. The robots' long, multi-jointed shapes had never seemed menacing before. Joanna shivered and glanced away but still there were no stars, only the cloud cover. Her apprehension quieted again into something more rueful.

Violence was unknown to the line, yet nonviable members were recycled, whether in fetal screenings or much later, because breeder-like traits persisted among them and must be pruned away.

If earning this job had also been a winnowing of those with anti-social tendencies—if leaving the crèche was a test that Joanna had failed by succeeding—she didn't want anything other than her fate. Yes, it would be cruel to kill her now. It was also right. And yet she'd cost the line so much training! Couldn't she still be useful somehow?

Louise stopped beside the nexus spider and said, "I'm going to allocate your find to the Michaud."

Joanna hesitated, caught between hope and terror.

"It's the proper action," Louise said. "It's because of them that we found this batch." Louise watched her closely, aware of her tension. "You haven't patched in."

The deeper link would be her truth. Joanna took the hand that Louise extended, a symbolic joining only, metal glove in glove. Then she tapped her implant—

The nexus spider collated information from all the others much like a line-senior directing her mates. Compilation imaging showed three thousand, three hundred and eighteen Sealies in the main body of this vein, balled up and bagged together by the dozens. Another ninety-one had been scattered as far as ten meters by the tidal grinding of the earth.

It was a superior find, no doubt from a hospital or nursery, and easily worth Joanna's life. On an average day they were glad to recover just five or six diapers from household garbage, most of which were badly degraded and worthless.

Fortunately, Sealies had been a dominant brand throughout the twenty-first century. The synthetics used were almost ideal. Old media advertised Sealies as

ultra leak-proof, fluid and odor absorbent, each one stamped with the distinctive logo of a blue, grinning seal.

The breeder civilization had discarded the feces and urine of their infants in such packets by the trillions. The population had been impossibly bloated until the pandemics—and here was their pre-contagion genetic treasure, sheathed in white plastic and polycotton filaments grayed with age and mold. Only one in thousands had been mummified by the heat of the rotting landfill, fused with the plastic or otherwise preserved in ways that the line could extract viable DNA, but the poor yield had never deterred them from their hunt. Pre-plague samples were necessary both to reestablish diversity and to further develop superior immunities, intelligence, and life-spans.

There were safer places to dig than alongside the California sea, but before the pandemics, this region had been host to an unusual blend of ethnic groups from across the globe. The landfills here were richer because of it.

Joanna's pride was what Louise singled out among her tangle of emotions. "You were excellent today," Louise said, continuing to hold her hand.

Surprised, Joanna flexed, muscle memory betraying the secret of her Diamond. "But the things I've felt . . ."

"You were better than Hel, tougher and more alert."

"The hallmarks of breeder thinking . . ." Joanna insisted, giddy with relief and love and, still, a razor of guilt.

Louise smiled. "You've been telling yourself too many ghost stories," she said. "It's okay. You're okay. It happens to all of us here, especially because of the implants. Most of what you were feeling was ours."

"Line-senior, no. This wasn't conveyance. I know when I'm—"

"You don't. When were you ever in a situation like this? The biggest crisis you've dealt with before today was leaving home. Believe me. The feedback can become its own problem."

Joanna nodded slowly. *Why am I arguing?*

It was Louise who answered the thought. "Your actions prove your heart, cub. Above all you're loyal. And you endured as well as any of us."

"I was selfish."

"Good," Louise said, and when Joanna's gaze lifted suddenly Louise had a new, fierce grin for her. "Yes. Good. We're not just out here to dig up Sealies."

Joanna began to smile back. "I . . . sometimes I thought . . ."

"You're quicker than most, cub."

"Sometimes I thought the matriarch must have planned for the ways I'd feel, even wanted it."

"Our line-mother was one of us, a digger, before you and I were born. It's been that way now for three of the past four generations."

Joanna stared. Then she laughed at the idea of herself ever becoming eligible for a senior position. "But they teach us leadership is internal," she said.

"In the crèche they have to. Ninety-five percent of the line never leaves home, cub." Louise grew quiet again. "We're weaker because of it."

This notion seemed even stranger, and yet Joanna understood. In the colony, life had been well-ordered and predictable. The line itself was equally tame, at least in comparison to the veterans of this site crew.

"We're starting to change," Louise said. Her voice was more forceful now, like a promise, and Joanna felt a bright, rising fire of self-worth.

The hostile lands stretching endlessly from the pole held too many resources to be ignored, too much sheer room, but to recolonize Earth would also demand new skills and capacities, new strength, new destinies.

"Thank you," Joanna said. ○

# SHIPBIRTH

Aliette de Bodard

Aliette de Bodard lives and works in Paris, where she has a job as a Computer Engineer. In the nighttime she writes speculative fiction, with a special interest in Mesoamerican culture. Her first novel, the Aztec fantasy *Servant of the Underworld*, was published by Angry Robot, and the sequel *Harbinger of the Storm* is forthcoming later this year. A recent story for Asimov's, "The Jaguar House, in Shadow" (July 2010), was part of the Xuya continuity—a universe where China discovered America a century before the Europeans. Her new tale deals with a very particular attitude of the Aztecs toward childbirth and pregnant women, taken several centuries into the future.

The *Hungry Coyote* had been in deep planes for ten days, the whole journey between the planet of Quetzalcoatl and this lonely rendezvous place; and for ten days Acoimi had felt himself going subtly, irremediably mad.

In deep planes, everything was wrong on the ship: the doors shimmering as if in a heat wave, the control panels blinking on a frequency that hurt the eyes, the metal of the corridors twisting and changing appearance from an oily sheen to the brittle transparency of crystal. There were sounds, on the edge of hearing: whispers and voices, snatches of songs that seemed familiar but receded farther and farther the more he attempted to listen to them . . . But worse than everything else was the vast presence of the *Hungry Coyote's* Mind, its processes dwarfing Acoimi's thoughts—like a black hole pushing against a vessel, compacting everything inside.

At least now they were back in real-space, in real-time, and everything seemed . . . almost normal, with just the spongy, elastic touch of quickened steel to the walls. And the presence, though it was muted away from the deep planes.

Acoimi shivered. Black One take me, I shouldn't be here, he told himself, not for the first time. Not that he had been given much choice: he was ticitl, physician, and he served where the Lord of Men sent him. But still . . .

Still, his other title, the one whispered behind his back, was *huecatl ahuiyal*: "the sweet one, the deep one," an inescapable reminder of what he had once been. Still, ahead of him was everything he had been running away from: the fears of his sweat-soaked nights, of his confused awakenings when he would find himself trapped in an unfamiliar body—before he realized it was no dream, that he had truly made the change . . .

The voice of the *Hungry Coyote's* Mind tore him from his thoughts. "Linking complete. Disembark."

Ahead of him, the tube had finished extending itself in the vacuum between the *Hungry Coyote* and the unborn ship—the one where he was needed. Acoimi crossed over, breathing a sign of relief in spite of everything else. Here, onboard the unborn ship, the walls were cool and hard, and nothing beat under his fingers, nothing twisted or yielded more than it should have.

"Transfer complete. Severing connection." The Mind's voice came from very far away, muted and almost harmless. Behind him, the walls sealed shut again, and the tube retracted back into the *Hungry Coyote*, even as the ship shifted further away. A small consolation, that: Acoimi wouldn't have to endure the Mind's presence longer than he had to. Minds were solitary by nature, and ships only approached each other in extreme need—and not for long.

The unborn ship followed the classic layout of a Jaguar class: four arms radiating out from the heart-room; five corridors linking the arms, and so on, a mirror of the mortal World's order—no, a reassertion, a reassurance that between the hungry stars, the order forged out of fire and blood remained, unassailable. The corridors were curved metal, intricately worked into a mass of warding symbols, from stylized knots to jade beads, their monotony broken here and there by frescoes: warriors extracting prisoners out of captured ships; women ascending into the Heavens, their hands pressed against their bloodied wombs; a procession of gods accompanying the Sun on His journey amongst the planets.

Acoimi found the midwife, Xoco, in one of the rooms on the circumference: the north one, that of Grandmother Earth, of death and decay. Her face was still thin and sharp, though the rest of her looked more like a matron, with her waist overflowing her jade-colored trousers. Her eyes were an uncanny gray, the same color as the hollows of her face. "There you are," Xoco said. "She's all yours."

All his. Acoimi stifled a bitter laugh. He'd avoided, carefully, looking at the third person in the room: the woman sitting cross-legged on the colored mat bearing the design of a green and yellow jaguar. Her face was slack, her eyes as vacant as those of a corpse.

"Huexotl, of the Atempan clan," Xoco said. She shook her head, and there was a hint of—sadness, disgust?—in the tight arc of her lips. Atempan was one of the sixteen clans, one of the greatest and oldest, going back all the way to Old Earth. To find a member of the Old Nobility reduced to this, waiting in this impersonal room for the ignominious coda to her life . . .

"How long?" Acoimi asked, carefully. The room was clean, smelling faintly of bleach, with not even a few bloodstains to bear witness to what had happened. What had he expected? Some writhing, pulsing mass of optics and flesh, flopping like a fish on dry land? As if they would leave such traces, days after the failure . . .

"The contractions started thirteen days ago." Xoco shook her head. She'd have been there since the start, of course—since Huexotl had come to the ship, her belly distended by the mid-stages of the pregnancy, her face no doubt shining with the anticipation of her glory. Xoco would have cooked for Huexotl; combed her hair every morning; massaged the mound of flesh in which the Mind rested, snug and tidy—readying her for the last and most dangerous part of the quickening: the moment when the womb was breached, and the Mind punched its way out, seeking to tether itself to the core in the heart-room—breathing life into the ship, bending the rooms, passageways, and corridors to its will.

Unbidden, the words they'd sung at his sister's funeral came back to him:

*Spread your wings upward, O Mother*

*O Giver of Life, O Yielder of Life*

*Spread your wings upward, O Mother*

*Let Death be your passage into the House of the Sun, the House of your father and mother . . .*

"I see," Acoimi said. He looked again at Huexotl, and put his satchel on the ground with a sigh. "You're free to leave."

Xoco watched him for a while, her gaze uncannily piercing, as if she were trying to assess his worth. "You volunteered for this?" she asked.

Acoimi laughed. Once, it would have been crystalline, enough to turn men's heads. Now it came out as rough and threatening. They'd rebuilt his throat and his vocal chords, but some things ran too deep to be disguised. Laughter ran too close to what he'd been, inside. "For determining whether she's dead? Who would volunteer for anything like that?" he said. "I'm no executioner. I'm merely here as you are, sent where I am needed."

Xoco didn't move. Perhaps she'd missed it when he entered, but now her face was pinched, in the peculiar way of people hunting for something they'd missed.

"You—"

"I wasn't always thus." Acoimi inclined his head and, even now, it was absurdly easy to fall back into old patterns, to cock his face slightly sideways with fluid grace, to display a seemingly careless simper—but no, he wasn't *that* anymore, not the flighty girl who'd watched her sister's body for the four days of the vigil. That was done and accounted for and the Duality had given him a new chance, a new life, one that wouldn't involve Minds or deep spaces or quickenings, not ever.

Or so he'd thought, until now.

"I see," Xoco said, in turn. "It's not always easy."

"No." He said nothing more and she must have sensed she'd gone too far. She bowed to him, as one equal to another. "Acoimi-tzin," she said. "I shall look forward to the results of your examination."

He nodded, though the only thing he was looking forward to was the end of this whole sordid affair.

Alone now, he withdrew a small mirror from his satchel, resisting the temptation to stare into it. He had been a beautiful girl—fine-boned, with round, full cheeks and wide hips that promised strength and endurance, all that was necessary to succeed at bearing Minds. As a man, he was too . . . fluted, too fragile, with proportions that seemed always out of kilter no matter how much weight he put on or lost.

"Huexotl, of the Atempan clan," he said, formally. "I am Acoimi of the Chimalco clan, *ticitzil* to the Master of Darts, the Lord of Men, Southern Hummingbird's Chosen. Will you submit to an examination?"

Huexotl didn't answer or move. Her eyes slid sideways, seemingly staring at the wall behind him. Dead, he thought, and clamped down on the thought. That was what he was here to determine: if there was still a chance she could be saved—fixed, in order to bear other Minds, to waste her blood and water birthing those monstrosities that moved in the planes between the stars . . .

And, if not . . . There was the rest of his kit: the injector at the bottom, with enough toxins to clog the lungs, to freeze the heart in the chest.

For an unarmed woman. What an honorable, soldierly thing to do. Acoimi's regiment commander would have stripped him of rank, had he known, but he, too, was far away in the past, beyond recovery.

*I'm no executioner.*

How good a liar he'd become, over time.

He took a deep breath—feeling a quiver, a fear that shouldn't have been there—and took out more of his equipment: the basin filled with water, which he set on Huexotl's lap. She raised one hand—for a heart-stopping moment, he thought she was reacting, but it fell back, as listless as the rest of her.

Carefully, he set the mirror floating in the water, and chanted a hymn to Jade Skirt, Goddess of Childbirth and Running Waters:

"Come, you my mother, stone of jade  
You of the Jade Skirt, You of the Jade Blouse  
Come, you my mother."

The face that swam into focus in the mirror seemed no different than the one above it, but then the water quivered, and a shadow flowed across the cheeks, darkening the skin until it seemed the color of the space between the stars.

*And if the face should darken, then the tonalli, the spirit that is in the heart, is gone, frightened away...*

No; that was mere superstition, not fit for this day and age. Acoimi did the ritual because it was expected of him, not because he thought it was going to bring any conclusive evidence. The gods were distant, and never intervened in the human world, no matter how much blood mortals shed.

Acoimi unpacked the rest of his equipment. He laid a band across her arm, waiting until the graph of her heart's voice coalesced on the cloth, slow and steady. He withdrew thought-nets, which he wrapped around her head, and watched the myriad beads of light slide across the metal mesh, like rain falling upon the world. Animal reflexes, all: data sent from the eyes into the cortex, little spikes flowing through the muscles and through the brain. But the pattern he ought to have seen—the blazing array of lights flickering in the familiar dance of the *tonalli* spirit—never came up.

Through it all, she had no reaction. Her knee jerked up when he did the reflexes examination, but her face didn't move, and she never spoke. And her eyes never did more than flicker.

He'd seen soldiers in shock in the sick-houses, faces as slack as this one: babbling idiots and screaming, bloody masses with only the rough shape of humanity. But never . . . never anything that seemed so final. Huexotl didn't have the rigidity of a corpse, and there was the occasional movement, but nothing, nothing that could be called life under any definition of the word.

Perhaps the gods, after all, weren't so distant. Perhaps Xoco was right and there was nothing left in here. Perhaps she was *cihuateteo* already: a goddess with shield and spear, accompanying the Sun in its endless rotation around the planets. Perhaps he should be on his knees, making offerings of blood—as if she'd ever take them, or see them.

Xoco was waiting for him in the corridor, looking more wan and tired than before. He wondered if she'd received any other communications; but no, that was impossible, no radio would travel anywhere until the ship was quickened and that, patently, would not happen, not with Huexotl.

"So?" she asked, though she must have seen the answer in his face.

"She's—" he almost finished it then, almost said the words that would seal her fate, make her death a reality. And then his sister Ixchel's face swam out of the darkness—her eyes closed, her washed hair spread around her body like a fisherman's net, her skin the color of things that never saw sunlight, and her lips down-turned, as if she already knew how harsh and lonely the afterlife would be, fighting the darkness around the Sun as she'd fought the pain of birth. "I need more time. Just to be sure."

"Suit yourself." Xoco's tone suggested this would make little difference, but there was no hostility in it, just bored indifference. And something else. He'd been good, once, at reading faces and emotions, but somewhere in his abortive career in the army, details had ceased to matter.

"You're free to leave," he said, finally. "I wouldn't want to—"

Xoco made a small, weary gesture as they moved toward her own quarters. "I saw this from the beginning. I owe it to her to stay till the end. Whatever it is."

Her own quarters were a riot of colors: an unexpected relief, after the bleach and the blankness of the other room. The walls displayed a slowly rotating array of frescoes, all of Jade Skirt, She who presided over childbirths, and of Her husband the Storm Lord, god of abundance and fertility—and of diseases, two sides of the same coin. A tortoiseshell pipe in the old style lay by the side of a disconnected terminal and the vid Xoco had been watching was frozen on the screen.

She dismissed it with a flick of her hand, and set to brewing chocolate, which she poured into two small bowls. The smell of vanilla and spices wafted up, as familiar as home. They sat, for a while, in silence.

"You can take up quarters of your own for the night," Xoco said. "Unless you want to call back the ship you came on—"

No. Ten days aboard that one had been more than enough—ten days of feeling the walls move around him, shifting every time he turned his back, ten days of slow dislocation as the Mind drew them further into the deep planes, into the lands of light and fractured colors that lay between the stars. Every time he did this, he remembered the first time: taking a quickened ship with his parents, to claim Ixchel's body from the faraway place where she'd died giving birth—the grief and rage coiled within him, unable to find their release.

It wasn't a good place. It wouldn't ever be.

He ran a hand on the wall behind him, finding it slightly warm, and frowned. "It's dead, isn't it? The Mind she—birthed."

Xoco's gaze flickered, for a brief moment. "It wasn't stillborn. It tried to drag itself through the heart-room, to project its essence into the ship's core. But it wasn't strong enough. Nothing happened."

An image leapt into his thoughts: some large and dark thing, dragging its way out of the womb, struggling to reach the center of the heart-room—extending glistening protuberances, desperately trying to cling to the core of the ship with the last of its strength, the same thing that had killed Ixchel . . .

He clenched his fists, and did not move until the image faded into insignificance. "Except that it took her sanity as it left."

"It happens." Xoco's voice was quiet, that of a teacher to her pupils. "Minds aren't only in the womb. They're in the body and spirit, in a very real sense. Sometimes, they can't disentangle themselves from their bearers."

Acoimi shivered. "So this ship is still unborn."

Xoco shrugged, a little sadly. "There are echoes, in places. Odd noises, things that shouldn't be here. But they're just ghosts. A memory of dead things."

"I see," Acoimi said. "I'll sleep in Huexotl's rooms. Just in case." Too late, he realized it was Xoco's responsibility: to watch over the pregnant women in her charge from beginning to end.

Xoco's lips were a thin arc—of anger, disgust? "You take your work to heart, *ticitl*." It seemed almost a curse in her words, not a measure of worth.

"I do what is needed," he said, as he'd said to her before.

She wasn't looking at him, but at the frescoes. Jade Skirt stood tall and proud, Her clothes turning into water from the waist down; tiny babies swam in Her stream, the color of jade and turquoise, the most precious things in the mortal World. "Tell me what it is, being a man."

"Everything I wanted," he said. A path to the blood-wars, to the glory of successful warriors, the riches showered upon the victors. Even if—

Her lips quirked up again, as if she were amused. "At first, I should imagine. But it's hard, isn't it?"

"Perhaps."

She watched him, a vulture about to pounce on a dying animal. "How many have you captured in battle?"

She knew the answer to that; she had seen his middle-aged face, the lock of hair falling down his back: that of the unproved warrior, the one who had taken no ships captive, and had sacrificed no prisoners.

"None," he said, and met her gaze, defiantly.

He'd expected to make progress through the ranks, just as his brothers had, laughing their way to finer clothes, larger rooms, and more privileges—but found himself, inexplicably, lagging behind his peers. Perhaps ruthlessness and fanaticism were a man's province, after all. Perhaps women just weren't suited for the blood-wars, no matter how far they'd come. Perhaps that was the reason he'd become a physician, nurturing patients back to health.

Or killing them, when the need warranted.

Enough. He wasn't going to wallow in self-pity forever. He had to strike back. That was what a warrior would do. He asked in turn—knowing the answer already, knowing it would wound her as deep as her questions had. "How many Minds have you borne?"

She didn't move, for a while. Then she inclined her head, in that effortless grace they taught in all the girls' schools: a caged bird presenting itself to a master. "I'm afraid I'm sterile. Nothing can quicken in my womb, neither Minds nor children, for that matter." She laughed, a little bitterly. "What a pair we make. I watch women ascend to glory, and you minister to the fallen warriors, the sons of the Fifth Sun. The watchers in the shadow."

We make no pair, Acoimi thought. The chocolate was warm in his hands, like the touch of a woman. "You could have asked for a gender-change."

She smiled. "I could. But not everyone has your courage."

Oh, but it wasn't courage, not at all. It wasn't blood-lust, or the desire to fight, or even ambition. What it boiled down to—once the skin had been flensed, the bones picked clean—was a simple enough matter.

It was just fear.

\* \* \*

## CUSTOMER SERVICE OR SUBSCRIBER ASSISTANCE

Please direct all changes of address  
and subscription questions to:



**ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION**  
6 Prowitt Street,  
Norwalk, CT 06855

That night, he dreamed of Ixchel—or of Mother, he wasn't sure—a confused mixture of faces distorted in the agony of birth, of ceremonies praising the women who gave their time and their lives making starflight possible. There were drums echoing in the emptiness of his ribs, and screams that might have been those of prisoners, but were not.

Mother moved through the glass panes of their home, the way she always did: carefully and quietly, as if every gesture might break an unexpected bone; the three Minds she'd borne lurked in the background, dark and distorted. He chased them, but they fuzzed out of focus, carried away between the stars like dandelion seeds in the air. Ixchel coalesced into being, fragile and insubstantial, a ghost with clawed hands—a warrior with spear and shield—a woman screaming in pain as her womb was torn apart. She lay quiet for her vigil, and the midwife whispered the prayers, over and over, assuring them that she was with the Sun now, that her fate was glory and light. And he looked upon her, ice slowly creeping around the hollow in his chest, and thought, one day, I'll lie here as well—and doubled over in pain, as if something were already in his womb, already trying to claw its way out . . .

Acoimi, someone said, and it was the voice of the *Hungry Coyote's Mind*, echoing under ceilings vaster than any planet. Acoimi.

He woke up, heart hammering in his chest. The room was silent . . . No, wait. Something was wrong.

The room was empty. Huexotl was gone.

Where could she have gone?

He got up, hastily slipping into a formal cloak over his suit, and went in search of her. She might have gone to Xoco's room, but no light or noise came from inside, and he could not face waking up the midwife and admitting to his failure. Accursed men's pride. At least, if nothing else, he'd got that from the gender-change.

Instead, he wandered the wide, bending corridors, desperately cocking his ear for any sound, any noise. Surely she couldn't have gone far. Surely—

Wall followed wall, a mass of protective symbols all jostling each other, piled atop each other like offerings in the storeroom of the Great Temple: human hearts, sleek eagles, curved, fanged snakes. There was nothing but his own panicked heartbeat and the single, wryly amused thought that at least she'd reacted to something. But surely that, too, was no more than an animal frightened by an unfamiliar face, running away without a destination in mind?

The corridors blurred and merged into each other, seemed to become those of the other ship, the *Hungry Coyote* and its Mind, piercing even his thoughts.

He should have known he'd never be rid of them. He should have known that, just as one of them had killed Ixchel, they would—

Faint snatches drifted toward him: the echo of a song, coming from very far away. "Huexotl?" he called. His voice echoed under the vast metal arches, coming back without warmth or substance.

The corridor flared open like a split ribcage. There was light ahead, the bright, harsh yellow of suns and corn. Everything seemed to bend and run together: crooked walls, doors twisting out of shape like melted metal, odd scratching noises as if rodents were onboard.

Ghosts. Memories. There was nothing here . . .

The song insinuated itself into his thoughts: a wordless rhythm like drums in a temple, like the hymns at a sacrifice, a plaintive litany that wouldn't leave his mind. Under his hands, the wall was warm, and a faint heartbeat throbbed under his fingers, a mirror of the one in his veins. His head was light, insubstantial, as if they were no longer in the mortal world . . .

He came to with a start, his hand still clenched against the curvature of the

wall. It was cool now, and nothing remained save for the song, coming from somewhere ahead of him. For a brief, timeless moment, he'd hung suspended away from real-time and real-space—as he had in the deep planes onboard the *Hungry Coyote*.

Dead. The Mind was dead, and whatever small part had leaked into the metal was dead, too. He was letting his imagination play tricks on him.

After what he'd been through to reach it, the heart-room seemed almost disappointing. It was a perfect circle, almost bare, save for the contraption set at its center: oily metal twisting upward toward the ceiling, a mass of angles and rods poking like bones out of Lord Death's throne. The light reflected itself on it like a hundred distant stars—but did not quite hide the darker patches on the floor, the memory of what had happened here.

He shivered, in spite of himself. The image of a Mind crawling across the floor was a hard one to banish.

Huexotl knelt in a corner, her gaze on one of the stains. She was the one singing, a hymn that he thought wordless at first, but then he recognized in the mangled, halting syllables familiar sentences.

"Spread your wings upward, O Mother  
O Giver of Life, O Yielder of Life . . ."

"Huexotl," he said.

She jerked up, her gaze dark and frightened, and pressed herself closer against the wall.

More higher functions and more emotion than he'd seen over the past day. Perhaps there was still hope.

Perhaps he was trying to solve the problem the wrong way. She might have retreated inside herself, so deep all he could see was the veneer, like the layer of chalk over a sacrificial victim, disguising the man into the incarnation of a god. And if that was the case . . . He had to draw her out.

"I'm here to help you," he said, kneeling by her side. She watched, eyes wide, as frightened as a cornered deer. Black One take him, what would it take? She hadn't been frightened of Xoco, or even of his examination. But it was night on a dead ship, with only the two of them in this wide, strange place where her mind had scattered. And he was a man.

Carefully, he relaxed, groping for memories that seemed to have fled. It had been instinct, once: something he'd never stopped to think about, just as the swagger and the urge to impress had come with the gender-change. Or so he'd thought. But, really, they hadn't rewired his brain, or remade his heart. His *tonalli* was still there, the spirit still the same. He could remember. He—

He thought of a time, so far ago it might have been another age: Ixchel and the girl he'd been, sitting together watching a vid of suitors fighting for a woman's hand. The girls were smiling, bragging to each other of how many Minds they'd bear—of the beautiful cloaks, of the jewelry and the land holdings that were the rewards for the enduring, for the brave. They had been young, then. They had been fools.

Ixchel had held herself that way: slightly hunched to disguise her size, turning her head carefully, deliberately, her lips slightly parted, as if to smile or blow a kiss.

"I'm not as I once was," he said. His voice slid and slipped, all the careful work he'd put into pitching it low and grave gone the way of fallen warriors. "You have nothing to fear."

Huexotl turned, slightly. Her eyes were blank again.

"I don't know what you're going through," he said, slowly. "I don't think anyone can who hasn't, not even those who've borne Minds. But I lost—someone, once, and I know how much it can hurt. I guess you're even worse than that."

"Spread your wings upward." Huexotl's hand rose, pointed at the metal at the center of the room. "Wings."

"That's good," Acoimi said, soothingly. "But you have to do something else. You're alive in there. I know it." He wished the conviction in his voice were also in his heart, but it wasn't. He'd seen Ixchel and he'd seen Mother, and he had known that bearing a Mind took something out of women, something that would never be recovered. He had known that he was more than a womb—and he'd thought, foolishly, that he could be a weapon, take the men's way into the Heavens. "Show me. Please." He held out his hands, palms out, like a man, showing he had no weapons. He shifted, bent closer to Huexotl, a sister sharing secrets, a friend confessing a crush: the woman he'd been, no more than a veneer of his own, indeterminate self.

Huexotl watched him, as imperturbable as an effigy of the goddess Jade Skirt: eyes shadowed, crouching against the wall like a hurt child, mumbling the same words, over and over, while her hand trailed over the metal as if its coolness were a comfort.

Who was he fooling? It was hopeless. "Come on," Acoimi said, straightening up. "Let's get back to our rooms."

He thought he'd ease back into the male stance, but, as they walked, he found he couldn't. Was it because of Ixchel? Huexotl didn't look anything like her, but still, she could have been her. But for an accident of fate . . .

That was the problem; that was why he couldn't let go of her. He didn't know how men hardened their hearts, how they could kill, ruthless, for the good of abstract, distant ideas like country, like gods. He could only see the small things: men and women, each different from each other, each enclosed within their own worlds and their own rules. He'd have killed for Ixchel, but it was too late.

He'd thought it was only his own uneasiness at the way things were. Men fought men to take prisoners; they didn't kill defenseless women. But it was more than that, a deeper revulsion in his gut, the same one that had sent him running away from himself. Perhaps, in the end, he was no more than a woman—betrayed here, then, as he had been in the regiments, by what the gender-change couldn't erase. By tenderness, and by sisterhood.

No, Black One take him, no. He wasn't that weak. He'd been betrayed once. It wasn't going to happen a second time.

Acoimi knocked at Xoco's door early the next morning, and found her sitting, bleary-eyed, before a bowl of synthesized maize porridge. "You're right," he said without preamble, blunt and aggressive, like a true warrior. "She's gone. Nothing we do is going to bring her back."

She cocked her head, thoughtfully. "The night changed your mind, then?"

"In a manner of speaking." The old him would have offered explanations and excuses, or at least felt embarrassed. No such thing here.

Xoco shrugged. "Fine. I'll pack my belongings, then. You know what you have to do."

"Yes." He'd thought he would feel fear, or unease, or remorse, but there was nothing in his chest but a growing hollow. He glanced around the room, saw what he had missed on entering: the neat boxes, the folded clothes on the sleeping mat. "You knew."

"I told you. I've seen many births." Xoco spread her hands. "Her soul died, out there on the floor, trying to reach the ship's core. You can't get it back, no matter what you do."

Alone once more, he walked back to his room. Huexotl was still waiting where he'd left her: sitting on the floor, her hands trailing on the mat, drawing random patterns that might have been glyphs, or merely the ramblings of a madwoman. Her vacant eyes moved to him, and held his gaze for a brief moment.

She could have been his sister.

But, if he had been her brother, he would never have let her get that way.

Acoimi knelt, and withdrew the injector from his satchel. He entered, by blind instinct more than anything else, the correct dosages for someone of her mass and build: enough to send her gently into the night of the underworld, but not so much that the components would react together and induce conscious paralysis. Then he sat by her side and bared her arm, watching the veins bunch under her skin.

The hiss of the injector echoed in the room as loudly as a gunshot. He clenched his hand, half-expecting her to choke and keel over, but of course it wasn't instant. She still had a handful of minutes, perhaps as much as a quarter hour, depending on how the toxin spread in her system.

"Say something. Please."

She watched him, imperturbable. At length, Acoimi was the one who couldn't bear the silence anymore. "Spread your wings upward, O Mother," he whispered, his voice breaking on the last word—picking up strength, climbing higher than it should have. "O Giver of Life . . ."

Huexotl's hands clenched, slightly. "Spread your wings upward," she repeated, and, gently, carefully, she unfolded her body, shivering as she moved. "O Mother . . ."

Acoimi jerked back in surprise. But she was utterly unaware of him: merely moving upward, making her slow way to the door and the corridors that lay beyond.

He knew where she was going: back to the heart-room, whatever its significance was in her diminished mind. He could have shoved her down, forced her to sit still. But to what end? He'd already done enough by killing her; why would he prevent her from choosing the place of her death?

Huexotl walked, swaying, going more and more slowly as the corridors twisted and bent around them—shining metal, beating carbon fibers—and the echo of her song, coming stronger and stronger as she faltered, until it seemed the ship was filled with the hymn.

At length, she reached the heart-room, stopped in the frame of the door, breathing hard, her hands clenched. And then she toppled like a felled tree, her hands still extended toward the ship's core—as if she were the Mind herself, still struggling to find the ship.

"Please . . . help . . ." she whispered. Her voice shocked him out of his immobility; it was the first coherent sound he'd heard from her, the first speech that wasn't madness or half-remembered scraps. Before he could reflect on the consequences of what he'd done to her, he was bending—lifting her up, her full weight resting on his arms—and, stumbling, carrying her to the core.

Her hands wrapped around a jutting bit of metal, and a slow smile spread across her face: not the blissful one that should have been induced by the drugs, but something far more primal, a fierce, brash joy that made him feel sick to his stomach.

"Spread your wings upward," she whispered. Her breath was the only sound in the air, slow and labored, her lungs slowly filling up with fluid, her muscles seizing one after another. "O Giver of Life . . ."

## MOVING?

Please send both your old and new address (and include both zip codes) to our subscription department.

Write to us at: Asimov's Science Fiction, Dept. NS, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855-1220.

Or on our website: [www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com)

Huexotl's hands fell back from the metal. Her gaze, roaming, found his, and there was something in her eyes—love, hunger, possessiveness, all of it merging into a feeling so alien and so strong it burnt him like acid thrown into his face, flensing all pretenses, all lies and evasions from him.

"Please . . ." she whispered. She dragged herself up, curled her body against the ship's core, her face resting against the metal, her breath fogging it. "Help . . . him . . ." She fell silent, the last of her muscles locking into paralysis. Her eyes closed. He couldn't have told at what point she died, but at some point, her immobility became the familiar one of a corpse, and the last of the color drained from her face, leaving her small and pathetic—and yet curiously human. In death, she was no longer blank or mad, just diminished the same way as everyone.

"I'm sorry," Acoimi whispered, knowing it wouldn't atone for anything. The fog of his breath moved across the bars and the tubes, sinking out of sight. He heard nothing but his own heartbeat, thudding painfully against his ribcage.

And, gradually, he became aware he was no longer alone. It was a vast, numinous presence—something that distorted the space around them, gave an oily sheen to the metal, quivered in the air like a heat wave. The room buckled and shuddered, trying to fit itself to new forms, new rules; the presence brushed him, light and fractured colors, a plane that hadn't been meant to open to him.

*Mother*, it whispered, or wept, or screamed. *Mother!*

A ghost. A memory, Xoco had said. But Acoimi was *ticitl*—physician, from beginning to end—even here, even now, in the face of . . . this; and he saw, not a ghost, not a memory, but a crippled being, dragging itself upward in agony and grief.

It hadn't been strong enough to quicken the ship, but something had leapt across, all the same. Something, slowly spreading in the corridors, slowly trying to gather itself together, until the final shock of Huexotl's death forced it to coalesce into being . . .

He tasted bile and blood in his mouth.

A Mind. A crippled, incomplete Mind, trying to control the ship, to put everything together—like a wounded warrior trying to fight, rising again and again, falling again and again, the assault rifle quivering in his hands, readying for a shot that might kill an enemy, or bring the coup de grace to a friend. In its convulsions to imprint itself on the core, it would disrupt the ship's equilibrium—take all or part of it into deep planes that couldn't sustain human life, leave them stranded in the midst of the void to choke, or starve to death . . .

He should run; that was what he should do. Get up and run, and find Xoco before that thing could do its damage. They could call on the *Hungry Coyote*, ask its Mind to blast this crippled, non-functional monstrosity out of existence, out of misery. He should—

He didn't move. The room shivered again: remodeling itself everywhere he watched, the walls receding further and further away, the metal changing to crystal to fibers and back to metal again. The air smelled of spilled oil and blood.

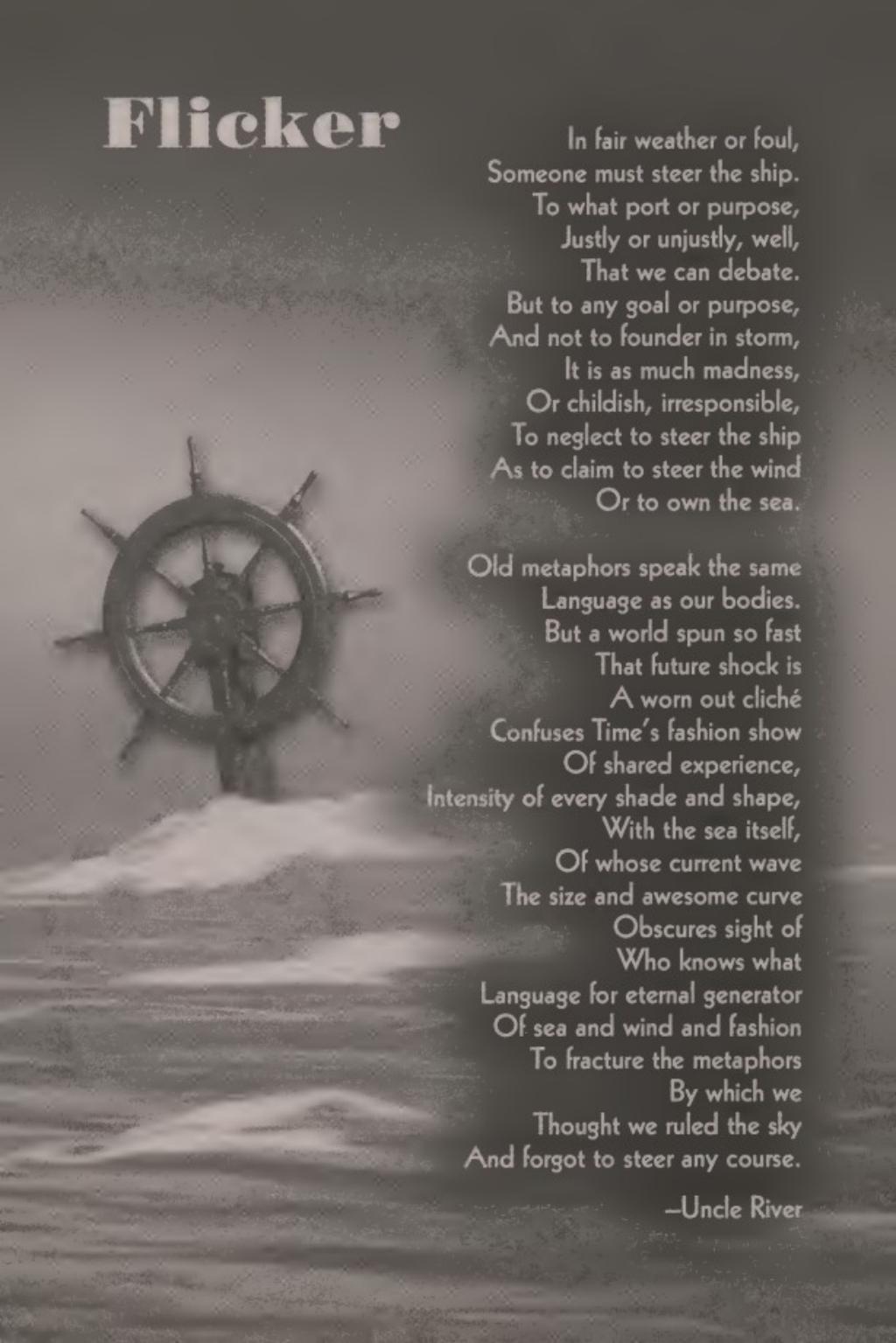
Help him, she'd asked. Her last wish; her last conscious thought.

What if in the end, it could gain control of the ship, just like any other Mind? What if—

In the end, he was a man—unable to bear the shame of killing an unarmed woman. In the end, he was a woman—made to give life, to yield life, but never to take it. In the end, everything betrayed him, or perhaps nothing did. Perhaps he was simply himself again: the girl who had wept over her sister's corpse, eaten inside by fear and grief; the man who had walked away from the blood-wars, sickened by the slaughter. Perhaps . . .

"Upward," he whispered. And he didn't know, not anymore, if it was a prayer against the inevitable, or—Black One help him—an encouragement. O

# Flicker



In fair weather or foul,  
Someone must steer the ship.  
To what port or purpose,  
Justly or unjustly, well,  
That we can debate.  
But to any goal or purpose,  
And not to founder in storm,  
It is as much madness,  
Or childish, irresponsible,  
To neglect to steer the ship  
As to claim to steer the wind  
Or to own the sea.

Old metaphors speak the same  
Language as our bodies.  
But a world spun so fast  
That future shock is  
A worn out cliché  
Confuses Time's fashion show  
Of shared experience,  
Intensity of every shade and shape,  
With the sea itself,  
Of whose current wave  
The size and awesome curve  
Obscures sight of  
Who knows what  
Language for eternal generator  
Of sea and wind and fashion  
To fracture the metaphors  
By which we  
Thought we ruled the sky  
And forgot to steer any course.

—Uncle River

**Tim McDaniel spent ten years in Thailand, first as a Peace Corps volunteer and then as a lecturer at Khon Kaen University. He found the disparity between "Why can't Thailand be the next Asian Tiger economic powerhouse?" and the Thai take-it-easy worldview an interesting dichotomy." That tension, plus the desire to present translated Thai nicknames as a Thai ear would hear them, led to the story of . . .**

# BROTHER SLEEP

**Tim McDaniel**

**M**y phone beeped, and I paused the game.  
"Yeah?"

"Hi," said Victory, calling from way down in Bangkok. Good thing the picture wasn't on; I wasn't wearing my university uniform or slumped wearily over a computer. "Just calling to check in," he said. "How's everything?"

"Fine. Listen, Victory, I don't have time to talk right now, okay?"

"You're not in class now, are you? From the schedule you sent us, I didn't think—" "I'll call you back in a few hours."

"A few hours? That'll be after midnight."

"I know." I hung up. I'd wake him up if I felt like it. Who did he think he was, anyway? My brother. What did that have to mean? That we'd be tied together for life? But he was a sleeper, and I hadn't slept since before I was born. He was the past, and I was the future.

Too bad I couldn't afford to study overseas. I could have gone to the U.S. or Australia. Or Germany. There were a lot of Thais in Germany. It would have been harder for Victory to call me there. Too expensive.

But I could forget about overseas. I couldn't even afford Bangkok. I was stuck here upcountry, in a no-name provincial university, far from the center.

If Sky ever found out about my family. That was on my mind.

I turned off the game and went out to see if Bird or Fat could think of anything we could do. The trouble with never sleeping is you got to fill all those hours.

One day a couple weeks later I invited Sky over to watch Increase sleep.

I figured it would be a laugh, something different to do. I'd planned to go out with Fat, but then he canceled. And Sky had been asking me about Increase since he'd moved into my dorm room. Sleepers were maids or rice farmers seen walking along the road, not university students.

I pulled my own bed down from the wall and we sat on it, watching Increase.

"So, what happened when he went to sleep tonight?" Sky asked. She held her long hair back with one hand and leaned closer and closer to Increase, until her nose al-

most touched his, then drew back again. "Did he just, you know, collapse, and you had to catch him so he wouldn't break his nose on the floor, or what?"

"No, not like that. He just gets slower, and finally he just gradually goes to sleep. Come on, Sky. You sleep, too." I got up and crossed the room to the little refrigerator. I pulled out a bag of sliced papaya and a couple of Green Spots.

"Not like *that*, though." She wrinkled her nose and plopped down on my bed. "I mean, every night, just sleeping for all those hours. Like an animal or something." I passed her a Green Spot and she took a swallow. I jabbed some toothpicks into the papaya slices and laid the open bag between us, along with a smaller bag of salt and ground hot peppers for dipping.

"There we go," I said. "You wouldn't find better service in the best restaurant in Bangkok."

"Yeah. Only Khon Kaen is a long way from Bangkok. Lord, I thought I would die when I got placed here. Third choice!"

"I know. Me, too." Not really. Northeasterners like me got a special rate, buffalo kids from Kalasin and Mukdaharn and Surin, and that was the only reason my family could afford the university at all. We're all so poor and disadvantaged in the Northeast, you know. Or so Bangkokians thought. Like there weren't gangs of sleepers in every alley of Bangkok, City of Angels.

Increase had curled into a funny crouch, like a fetus in the womb. It was a warm night, because it hadn't rained for a couple of days, and he had pulled the sheets from his chest, maybe without even waking up.

I'd been at the university for less than two years, and already seeing someone sleep like that was like a visit to the zoo.

"Turn the light up. I can hardly see him."

"No, I'm not supposed to. It might wake him up."

"How do you know?"

"Oh, I got a brochure when he moved in. It explained all about noise and lights and stuff." Well, they could have sent a brochure. They should have.

Sky was getting bored. She turned to brush a hand across my computer screen and paged through the list of my vids. "You don't have anything new."

"No, I got to get some more."

"Hey, you got a message." Before I could stop her, she'd tapped the icon.

It was Victory, his face tired. "Hey, Horse. Mom says you haven't called for a while, so I'm just checking to make sure everything is okay, that you don't need anything. Call us when you get a chance. During the daytime or evening, you know."

"That your brother?"

"Yeah. Older brother."

"Where does he go to school?"

"Oh, he's finished." Never started—but I couldn't tell her that.

She turned back to Increase, who had now twisted into a new position. His sheets were tangled, too. It looked like he'd had a fight with them. His head was tilted back on the pillow, and his mouth was wide open, but slack, like when a stupid person is trying to think. A thin trickle of liquid ran out of the side of his mouth, and down to the pillow.

"Look at his mouth," Sky said. "He's probably dreaming about food. They do that, don't they? Have all those dreams and stuff. And his blankets are all twisted around. Look. I wonder if he could strangle himself with them. He'd never even have a chance to wake up as his air was slowly cut off. He'd just drift away."

"I don't think it works that way."

Sky rolled her eyes. Then she smiled. "Hey, would he wake up if we just took a peek?"

"A peek?"

"Yeah, you know. See what he's got down there. I wonder if he's like other guys in that way."

"He's just like other guys, okay?"

"Okay," Sky pouted. "Anyway, if he's just like other guys, how come he has to sleep so much? Is he here on a scholarship or something, some buffalo boy from the rice paddy?"

"No, he told me he had the treatment, but it just didn't take. I guess that happens sometimes, like once in a million or something."

Sky was already bored with the topic. "Hey, let's go shopping," she said. "I have to get some stuff for my room. We can go with Bird and Cucumber and her fat sister."

I called Victory that afternoon. I had to wait a bit while they got him from the work floor, and when he finally came to the phone his face was splotched with sweat. He pushed back a lock of hair, leaving a streak of some kind of industrial lubricant across his forehead. I squirmed in my white and black university uniform.

"Hey, Horse. I'm glad you called. It's been a while."

"Yeah, well, I've been busy, you know. Classes."

"Busy, twenty-two hours a day? Mom and Dad were getting worried. You got the last bank transfer, right?"

"Yeah, the money's fine." I had to be much more careful than my friends—but there was nothing more Victory or Mom and Dad could do about that. What little Dad hadn't thrown away on keeping Grandpa drunk was all in the little farm. But a son can't say no when his father asks him for money, and Grandpa was not shy about asking.

"Also, Mom says she was surprised to hear about your test in Business Ecolaw last month. Is that class going any better now?"

I scowled. "Oh, that was just one test. I don't see why it's any of their business. I'm doing all right."

"It's their money, so they're told. Remember, they gave up a lot to give you this chance. If you don't—"

"I know, I know." Same old thing. Victory's money, too, though he didn't say it. "I said, I'm doing okay."

Victory looked at me a long time. His whole face and neck were wet. His factory didn't have air-con. I thought of the busy, noisy work floor, with the metal roof that magnified the heat, the smell of sweat, the sounds of men being crude and comradely. Then it would be back home to his tiny room. "Okay, then. Just call us more often, right? It's not just about the money, though they've got to think about that. It's you. They want to know about your life."

So I talked a little bit about the dorm food and about the baby cobra that they'd found nestled in a men's room in the Engineering Faculty. I didn't tell him about Sky—Mom and Dad had made it clear that they didn't want me dating until I finished at the university.

And I didn't tell him about my new sleeper roommate.

Sky came over one morning about 5:30. Increase was still sleeping, and I was unfolding the bookshelf I'd picked up, as quietly as I could.

"What's up?" Sky burst through the door like she always did, no knock. I used to think it was cute.

"Not so loud," I whispered.

"Oh. The sleeper. It's funny. I've never even seen him awake!" She dropped a shopping bag onto the floor and took a chair. Her shirt was unbuttoned to a point that would give my mom a stroke. But it was so hot.

"That's because he's in classes most of the day, or off studying in the library. He doesn't have so much free time."

"Look at him," she said.

"What?"

"The red spots on his face. I wonder if they hurt."

"Huh? Oh, that's just from sleeping. If he sleeps on his hand, or something, it might leave a mark."

"Weird. Like maybe the circulation doesn't work right, when his body is slowed down."

Increase opened his eyes, and after a bit opened them a bit wider as he noticed Sky.

"Were we too loud?" I asked. "Sorry."

"No, no, no problem." He seemed a little confused. He looked strange, too. His eyes were puffy, like he was having an allergic reaction to something, or like he'd been crying.

"Increase, this is Sky."

"Hi."

Sky nodded.

Increase closed his eyes again, and opened his mouth wide. After that he lay back down again. Then he began to stretch. Finally he sat up and rubbed his face.

"Guess I'll get up," he said.

Sky laughed. "After such a long sleep, you should sure be ready to!"

He got out of bed, and stumbled a little, as if he had forgotten how to use his feet after such a long time in bed.

"Hey, I saw you the other night. You had a dream, didn't you?" Sky said.

"I guess I did. But I don't remember it now." He sat on the edge of his bed facing us.

"You know, a dream about eating something."

"Eating something?" Increase rubbed his face again.

"Yeah. Hey, you *still* seem a little groggy. How can a person sleep so much and still be tired? Anyway, there was some, you know, saliva coming out of your mouth. So I knew that you were probably dreaming about eating." Sky hardly blinked, and her mouth was open in a smile. I fidgeted.

He was embarrassed, yet he smiled at her like he knew a secret. "No, no, that just happens sometimes. It's not because I was dreaming about food. At least, I don't think so."

"Oh."

"You guys hungry now?" I asked. They ignored me.

Suddenly I felt like the air-con had been turned way, way up. The thought came to me: Sky was playing around with someone else. I had no reason to think that, but watching her, the way she flicked her eyes all over Increase even though I was right there, I believed it.

"Besides, you dream, too, when you sleep. Everyone does. That's what the scientists say, at least," said Increase.

"I know that's what they say, but I've never remembered a dream when I woke up. I don't know anyone who does. None of my friends."

"Yeah. I don't always remember them, either. I often remember just parts when I wake up. It's like I've been channel-surfing."

"Sounds like fun."

"Sometimes it is. But sometimes they just keep me from resting."

"But you're already asleep when you have them!"

"I know. But some dreams are so weird or tense, like dreaming about a test, or someone I know doing something weird, that when I wake up I feel like I haven't slept at all."

"That doesn't make sense," said Sky. "What's the point of a story that doesn't make sense? I wonder if you have some kind of psychological problem, and these strange kinds of dream are a symptom. Maybe the same deficiency in your brain that didn't allow you to be, you know, cured, is also causing that."

"Sky!"

She looked at me. "What? Just trying to be helpful."

"I'm fine," said Increase. He snagged his *paokama* from the floor next to the bed and went down the hall to the bathroom, wrapping it around his waist.

Sky said, "It's like a time machine. Everyone used to be like that."

"A lot of people still are. Probably most people."

"Yeah, but no one *I'd* want to know!"

Still, she hung around our place a lot. She would watch Increase sometimes, kind of wary and kind of fascinated.

Increase never seemed to have enough time to study, to keep up with the rest of us. He had developed ways to fight his sleepiness. He would take cold showers, or drink Red Bull, or exercise, or eat. I kept expecting to find some crazy medicine, but I never saw any pills around. One night in November, before midterms, he did all of the other things, trying to stay awake so he'd be ready for the tests. About four o'clock he stood up to get a picstik off a shelf, and he almost fell over. He had to grab the back of his chair to steady himself.

My family just went to bed when they got tired, or when they got a chance. They knew where they belonged. Increase had too much money to know his place.

I had to say something. "Go to sleep, already! You're going to cause yourself some kind of damage."

"I'll be fine," he said. He couldn't even enunciate all that clearly—the damage, I thought to myself, was already occurring. "I'll sleep after the test."

"It doesn't work that way," I said. I threw down my comic book. "You can't sleep for a week and then stay awake for another week."

"How would you know anything about it? Anyway, for a day or two, you can."

"Right," I said. "I think you'd better call your doctor. This is just not healthy. Look at yourself!"

"I said I'm fine."

"You can't do this." I hunched over in my chair and looked at him. He looked back at me, but I don't know how clearly he could see. I remembered once when my father got up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom. He'd walked right into a wall. "Listen, it may not be too pleasant to hear, but you have to accept reality. You're just not like normal people. You just can't keep up the way other people can. Sorry, Increase, but that's just the way things are. Even if you fail a class, you can take it again." He could afford that. Or his family could.

He was angry. "I said I'd be fine, okay? Now just let me get back to work. I have to get a good grade. How am I going to get into grad school otherwise?"

I was surprised. "You plan to go to grad school?"

"Do you know any jobs for undergrad geology majors?"

He was taking on too much, but what could I do? Then it came out of my mouth before I realized it.

"Someone here needs a dose of reality."

Increase looked up. "Yeah, well, maybe I'm not the only one in here who does."

"What is that supposed to mean?" I said.

"I mean about Sky." He reached up again for the picstik.

I was really starting to get angry now. "What about Sky?"

"I mean you know that she's going to dump you."

"No way. You have no clue how firm we are. So just be quiet."

By now Increase had given up pretending to study. "Oh, come on!" he said. "She flirts with every guy she comes across!"

"I haven't seen her flirting with you." I touched him a little with that one.

"I see her all over the place. And you're blind if you can't see that you're just a stop along the road for her."

"Lizard!" I said. I'd never called anyone that name before, never used that kind of language.

"A well-traveled road, too."

"Lizard!"

"Whatever. It's true, though."

"What would you know? It's not like girls are lining up to be with a sleeper like you. They want someone like that, they can go for the handyman or the garbage collector—"

"I know what I am!"

"And I don't? Is that what you mean?" Had he talked to my brother, my parents, somehow?

"Huh?"

I left the room, shaking.

From the hallway I called Sky. She wasn't in, so I left a message.

"Sky, it's Horse. Listen, I think it's time for us to make some decisions. I can't take living with the sleeper anymore. I think we should look for an apartment. Get back to me as soon as you can, and we can start looking. I don't want to spend another day in that damn room."

I felt drained. The rage had leaked out of me. It had taken something else with it, and left me exhausted. I decided I'd better sleep. Not in my room, though. I crossed the campus to dorm 16 and went up to the third floor. I knocked at 1634.

Bird opened the door. "Hey, Horse. Come on in."

"Hi, Horse," said Fat, looking up from the computer. They were the only two in the room.

"Hi, guys." I pulled down a cot and sat on it. Bird sat at the desk and started writing something.

"You ready for midterms?" asked Fat.

"Oh, yeah."

Fat looked at me more closely. "Something wrong?" he said. "Some problem with Sky?"

Bird looked at me then, too. "Oh, yeah," he said. "Water was over here earlier, and she said that yesterday she saw Sky with—"

I interrupted Bird as if I hadn't noticed that he was speaking, and I ignored Fat's question. "No problem, really," I said. "I had a little fight, a bit of a misunderstanding, that's all."

"You had a fight with her? Did you hit her?" Fat's eyes went wide. "I can't believe it!"

"Lord, Horse," said Bird. "I can see your getting pissed off, but hitting?"

"No, I did not hit Sky!" I said. "What are you guys talking about? I had a fight with that damn sleeper. With Increase."

Both Bird and Fat took a moment as what I had said sunk in. "Oh," Fat said, finally. "You hit Increase? I thought you guys were friends."

"Yeah, he's just a great friend," I said. I couldn't even think about why they thought I would hit Sky. My mind veered off when it came too close. I waited for them to explain, but they didn't say anything. Bird turned back to his desk, and be-

gan tapping his pen against the plastic, and then Fat swiveled back to the computer, trying to look both busy and casual.

"Mind if I sleep here?" I said after a while. Fat looked up as if he had forgotten I was there or something. "Sure," he said.

So I stretched out on the cot and closed my eyes. For the first time I could remember, I had a little trouble falling asleep.

When I woke up it was about seven; I'd been out nearly an hour and a half. Fat was sleeping, and Bird wasn't in the room. I had to get ready for classes.

I went back to my room. I paused outside the door, but it was quiet inside, so I opened it as quietly as I could and looked in. Increase was sleeping, mouth open and sheets tangled. I got my stuff, jamming my pad and memchips into my little *yaam*. Sky liked to say that carrying that traditional type of shoulder bag made me look like either a hick or an art student, but I'd told her I didn't care. In fact I'd thought it made me look different, and so somehow stylish, cutting edge. Idiot.

I slung the *yaam* over my shoulder and left the room. The door slammed shut behind me as I left, and there was a muffled "Uhhhnn?" from inside the room. It didn't make me feel good, but I smiled as if it had.

I sat through my classes that day, not paying attention. Afterwards I went to find Sky. Maybe my imagination was making this into something it wasn't.

But she wasn't in her room, and none of her friends knew where she was. Maybe it was just as well. I was trying hard not to think about what Bird had begun to say. I scuffed my feet, and red dust rose up from the unpaved path. The rain the afternoon before had tamped it down a bit, but now the sun had dried it back to powder. The dust lay thick on the leaves of the banana trees along the path.

I got back to my room about seventeen o'clock. Increase was there, sitting at his desk. I didn't know what he was going to do. Start fighting? Tell me more about Sky? But I had no place else to go. I glanced at him and then plopped into a chair, sighing and taking some disks out of my bag. I tossed them on the floor with disgust.

"A lot of homework for tonight, huh?" said Increase. He was mumbling his words.

"Yeah," I said. "Ajaan Tawatchai seems to think I have nothing better to do than run case studies."

I waited a moment. "Sorry, you know," I said. "It was nothing." If I made him mad, he might tell me too much.

"Yeah," he said.

"Come with Bird and Fat and me for dinner tonight."

"Yeah. Maybe."

I didn't see Sky for the next couple of days. She didn't reply to my messages, and she seemed never to be in her room. Finally I saw her coming down the steps of the Central Library, just as I was heading up, to return some tapes for Fat. She had put a yellow streak into her hair, like an old-time Japanese girl.

"Hey, Sky!"

She looked up and saw me, then glanced around. "Hey."

My mind had suddenly emptied. "Uh, I've been looking for you. Your roommates didn't seem to know where you were."

"Yes, well, I've been kind of busy." Her gaze moved past me, flicking from one thing to another. "You know how it gets around midterms. Actually, I really have to get going. But I'll see you around, okay?"

"Sky? What's going on? You've been avoiding me. What's going on?"

Sky laughed. "Wow, so serious!"

I stepped closer, and she took a step back.

"You act like we're married," she said, giggling. "You know that I've never liked restrictions. Nothing personal."

"Restrictions?" I heard a distant buzzing in my head. "You're breaking up with me? Is that it? You want to break up? But we've been so . . . perfect!"

She maintained her empty smile. "Oh, don't be so theatrical, Horse. Sorry, but I have to go. See you around."

Then she was off down the stairs, and hurrying across the road to the central canteen.

Later, I tried to put the best face I could on it. She wanted no restrictions—that could mean that she thought that we'd fallen into a rut, and she needed some time to herself. I could live with that. So I didn't call her the next day, or the day after that. I'd allow her some time to relax, think things over. She'd appreciate my restraint. The third day, I just left her a message—"Hope everything is going okay with you. I hope you do well on your midterms!"—just to show her that I was thinking of her, but that I was comfortable with her having some time off.

She didn't answer, and a few days later I dropped by her room. She wasn't there, but I talked to Cucumber. She was munching on fried bananas out of a greasy paper bag, dipping them into a cup of strawberry yogurt, in front of a video with the sound turned off.

"Hi, Horse."

"Hi. Have you seen Sky?"

"Not for a while. I saw her this morning, but I'm not sure where she is now." She wiped some yogurt off her chin with the back of her hand.

"Ah. Well, could you give this to her?" It was a little stuffed panda, like they used to have in China, with a note attached, saying, "Let's talk. Call me, okay? I miss you."

"Oh, sure, yeah. It's cute." She wiped her hand on her skirt before taking the panda from me.

Another week passed with no word from Sky, and I thought about leaving another message. Part of me knew why she hadn't called, had known for a long time, but I couldn't give up. I just knew that if I could talk to her, we could sort out whatever the problem might be. We'd been too close for her to shrug me off the way Increase shrugs off one of his bad dreams.

So I sent another message to her computer. "I hope you liked the panda. I just thought of you when I saw it. I would really like us to talk. Don't worry—I just want to talk. I'm sure we can work this thing out."

Still nothing the rest of that week, although I checked for messages several times a day.

Then Increase and I were out at a Korean barbecue restaurant in downtown Khon Kaen, the open-air place in front of the Prince Theater, celebrating the fact that Increase had squeaked through the midterm that had been worrying him the most. We had already eaten, and all that was left on the metal cone stove in front of us were sizzled dried scraps. I was on my third beer when I saw Sky come in, walking from the direction of the theater.

I almost called to her, and then it registered that she was pulling a guy behind her, tugging on his hand. How could I have not seen him earlier? I just watched as they found a table. There were two seats at it, but they used only one, because she sat in his lap. The waiter acted like nothing was wrong.

**READERS:** If you are having problems finding Asimov's *Science Fiction* at your favorite retailer, we want to help. First let the store manager know that you want the store to carry Asimov's. Then send us a letter or postcard telling us the full name and address of the store (with street name and number, if possible). Write to us at: *Asimov's Science Fiction*, Dept. NS, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855-1220. Thank you!

I was numb. I seemed to be watching myself from mid-air, or plastered against the ceiling, halfway across the room.

"Let's go," I said finally. I signaled to the waiter and fumbled my debit card onto the screen he held out. "Let's get out of here." My throat was tight, and the words could hardly escape.

Increase hadn't seen Sky. His back was to her. But he seemed to understand that I wasn't going to entertain any stupid questions. "Right," he said, putting on his jacket. It was too hot to wear a jacket, and I almost told him so. But he wanted to keep his skin pale.

That night, as Increase slept with a silly little smile on his face, I lay on my own cot. I kept replaying the scene in my head. Each time it was worse.

I clenched my teeth. What an idiot I had been—continuing to chase after her when she had made it clear that she wanted me out. I sat up in the cot and hit my thigh with my fist, hard. It hurt, but not enough.

Increase made a little noise and turned over in his bed. I had almost awakened him. I glared at him, and then got to my feet and left the room, closing the door loudly behind me.

I walked all over campus, trying to outpace my thoughts. The night air was hot and still. I was seething and humiliated and I knew that I would throw myself at Sky's feet, crying and begging, if I saw her, which made me even more furious.

I walked past the Science faculty and the Humanities faculty and the pool and the tech center, and I couldn't think of anywhere to go, so finally I returned to my room. Increase was still sleeping.

I stood at the foot of his bed and watched him. A single dim light was burning in the corner, and I watched his slack, brown face. He was a Northeasterner, like me. What was he thinking? Nothing but dreams. Or nothing at all; there was just blankness, holes in experience. My own periods of sleep were just gaps in my awareness, dollops of unconsciousness doled out with a teaspoon. Increase had oblivion every night, for seven or eight or ten hours a time. Sometimes he could even sleep just because he was bored or hot, even in the middle of the day.

I couldn't do that. My family had taken that option from me, and I'd been so happy that they had. But I had to live nearly every minute of my life, and every minute all that was in my head was Sky, laughing and throwing her head back and sitting on that guy's lap. There was no place I could run away to. I suddenly wanted to hit Increase.

I moved away from the cot, restless, and went out again, this time to the 7-Eleven at the edge of the campus, and bought two bottles of Mekhong. I'd never been much for whiskey, but if there was a time for it, this was it. And anyway it was a lot cheaper than beer.

I brought the whiskey back to my room. I pulled down my cot again and started drinking. I took it like medicine, in as few swallows as possible, not mixed with anything. I didn't want to savor it, I just wanted to get it down. I emptied one bottle and started on the other. It burned a raw runnel down my throat like gasoline, like pesticide.

After a time I got dizzy, but my mood hadn't improved. A few more drinks, and I tried laughing at myself—weren't drunks happy?—but the most I could do was chuckle. There was no relief in the laughter, but it distanced me from myself, or I told myself it did.

I put down the second bottle and lay back on the cot. The room was swirling around. I was underwater. Time had slowed, too; when I decided to put my arm under my head, there was a long delay before my arm did it.

I turned my head, and after a short blank time I focused my eyes and looked over at Increase, sleeping in his bed. Time had not only slowed down for him, it had completely stopped; he lay in the same position as he had been in when I'd started drinking.

Then I had to go to the bathroom, so I stumbled down the hall. I was surprised at how little the drink had affected me. After I urinated I stood there for a moment, feeling my stomach squirming, but I didn't let myself get sick. I was tempted to, but I didn't want to donate the therapeutic effects of the whiskey to the toilet. I went back to the room, and lay down.

Sky was still there, in my brain, but my actions, her reactions, my further actions, her lack of reaction, all felt now more like theories than lived events. The whiskey had not made me unconscious, not made me forget, not made me happy, but at least I was detached from my life, looking down on it like how as a school kid I had watched a little house lizard dying on the wall of my house. My dad had been painting the kitchen. The lizard had begun to walk across the wall, and had gotten stuck in the wet paint. I had watched it struggling, moving less and less as the time went by, and I had felt nothing but a mild curiosity. Later my reaction horrified me; now I envied that way of seeing things.

I felt so tired. My eyes closed, and eventually I fell asleep.

I slept for almost three hours, and woke with dizziness and a headache and a desperate need to visit the bathroom again. Returning to the room, I saw that it was nearly daybreak. There was a soft light outside, just outlining the window shade, and I could hear a few tentative birds peeping from the mango trees near the dorm. Increase was still sleeping.

The Mekhong bottles lay at the foot of my cot. I hadn't realized how strong they smelled. They clinked against each other as I swung my feet down off the cot. Then, since I was still dizzy, I lay down again. But I couldn't sleep anymore, and I kept thinking of Sky, of what I should have done or said differently, or of what she might be doing right now. And about who she was with.

I had hoped that some time spent in oblivion might give me a chance to get a hold of myself, to pull myself back together. Time to let my brain accept things and move on. But my thoughts of Sky were as immediate and cutting as before.

And Increase was still sleeping.

A few weeks later I was in the dorm room with Increase, running a case study and bouncing a ball off the wall. He was on his bed, but he wasn't sleeping. He was reading a comic book.

The ball rolled under his bed. I couldn't see where it was, so I reached for it, feeling around with my hand.

I touched something soft. I pulled it out to see what it was.

A hair band. I recognized it.

"Hey, this is Sky's. Was she over here looking for me or something?"

Increase didn't put the book down, but he froze.

"Well?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's been there all this time."

"Did you see her over here or not?"

"How should I know?"

"What do you mean? I'm just asking—"

He was mad now. "She came over here two nights ago, when you were out. And she—" He said it all in one breath, and then stopped. "Things are over between you two anyway. I didn't plan it. It's just she is really cute, and you're right that girls don't usually—" He looked up and saw my face and shut up.

I tried to say something, I don't know what, but nothing came.

And then he started to say something, but before the words could leave his mouth I lunged at him. The blow was badly aimed; I could hardly see through the haze. But it was a solid punch, just at his left eyebrow. He fell back, his book falling to the floor, and when he got up I hit him again. He sat on the floor groggily, holding his hand to his head. I left.

I sat down in the hall outside my room. I wanted to run away, go somewhere. I wanted to get out of myself. I wanted to sleep.

Victory called the next night. He told me that he and dad were coming up to visit me next weekend. They'd jam themselves into an all-night common bus, next to the laborers and maids and chickens in baskets, and the bus would stop at every little town, and people would try to sell Pepsi and skewers of chicken and sticky rice at each one, pushing them through the open windows, and the red dust would cover everything. When I met them at the bus station in town they'd be puffy-eyed and smelling of sweat, in rumpled peasant clothes.

"Don't come up," I said. "I'll come down."

"Dad says he wants to see the campus."

See where his money was going. "It's not much to look at."

"We can meet some of your classmates. We'll take them out for dinner."

Lord. Roast chicken or fish, with green papaya salad and sticky rice. I could just picture Sky sitting on the floor and eating with her hands like a peasant.

"Don't come up."

"Why not, Horse? We'll have some fun. You can't study all the time."

"Don't. Please, don't."

Victory's face went dark. "You're ashamed of us? Is that right? Dad is paying for your life there. Remember that? Do you?"

"Leave me alone! Dad is paying—I know that! But I'm going to escape—I'm going to be big, and make a lot of money, and then I can throw it back in his face! I'll have new friends, and a new life, and I don't need you to embarrass me!"

"We're all Thai—and there are still more of us than there are of you. Horse, you should—"

"No! No 'should's! I'll call you when I graduate. I'll send you some money then. Until then, just leave me alone! I don't need you! All you do is drag me back down!"

I hung up.

We're all Thai. Right. Sleepers and non-sleepers: we might as well be different species. But he was right. We're Thai, and sleeper or not we remain so. Take away sleep, and you get all those extra hours in a day to do things. But we're Thai, we're not Singaporeans or Koreans or damned Japanese. Hyper-accelerate the Thai world and you have more time for eating and playing and videos and talking, and for wallowing in yourself. We're just pretending to be Asian Tigers, putting on the show—no sleep, Westernized lifestyles, chasing the money, the honor—but we're still water buffaloes under the skin, patient, content to be.

I still wanted to sleep.

I got through the rest of the quarter. I failed Ecolaw and English. I got put on academic probation. I spent most of my time in Bird's room. It was crowded, but they didn't complain.

The next semester I applied for a new roommate. I saw Increase around the campus sometimes, and twice I saw him with some girl. Not Sky. Once I saw Increase napping on a bench under a papaya tree, a little smile on his face. I didn't wake him. ○

# NEXT ISSUE

## MARCH ISSUE

Our lead story in March is multiple Nebula-Award winning author **John Kessel's** quietly moving novelette about a man whose memories are wiped "Clean" both by time and science. **Robert Reed** closes out the issue with his novelette "Purple"—a brutal depiction of life in a menagerie where a man tries to fashion an existence worth living while striving to outwit his alien keeper.

## ALSO IN MARCH

In his fast-paced and amusing short story, almost-new writer **Nick Wolven** reveals how "Lost in the Memory Palace, I Found You"; **Steve Bein's** second tale for *Asimov's* is a novelette that tells us the truth about "The Most Important Thing in the World"; and *Asimov's* regular **Ian Creasey's** novelette steps across timelines to explain why "I Was Nearly Your Mother." **Neal Barrett, Jr.**, has a gonzo vision of the future of machine intelligence and we'll go "Where" he wants to take us in his latest short story; **Nancy Fulda** makes her second appearance in *Asimov's* with a bittersweet short story about "Movement"; and new writer **An Owomoyela's** short story shows us how people cope with the terrifying revelation of "God in the Sky."

## OUR EXCITING FEATURES

**Robert Silverberg's** "Reflections" lets the secret to successful writing out of the lamp with "The Plot Genie"; **James Patrick Kelly's** "On the Net" exchanges "New Brains for Old"; **Paul Di Filippo** contributes "On Books"; plus we'll have an array of poetry and other features you're sure to enjoy. Look for our March issue on sale at newsstands on January 25, 2011. Or you can subscribe to *Asimov's*—in paper format or in downloadable varieties—by visiting us online at [www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com). We're also available individually or by subscription on *Amazon.com*'s Kindle, *BarnesandNoble.com*'s Nook, and *ebookstore.sony.com*'s eReader!

## COMING SOON

new stories by **Norman Spinrad, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Jack Skillingshead, Neal Barrett, Jr., Ken Liu, Felicity Shoulders, Carol Emshwiller, Nick Mamatas, Alan DeNiro, Mike Resnick, Michael Swanwick, William Preston, Rudy Rucker, Esther M. Friesner, Christopher Barzak**, and many others!

# EVE OF BEYOND

Bill Pronzini and Barry N. Malzberg

2011 marks the fortieth year that Barry N. Malzberg and Bill Pronzini have been collaborators. Together they've published four novels (one science fiction, three suspense) and more than fifty SF, fantasy, and mystery short stories. On his own, Bill has written seventy novels and three hundred short stories of various types, as well as four books of nonfiction. In 2008, he was the proud recipient of the Mystery Writers of America's highest award, the Grand Master. That same year, Barry won the Locus Award for Best Nonfiction Book for *Breakfast in the Ruins*.

I am alone in my private office, virtually previewing Eve of Beyond's new fall line of menswear, when my son and partner Arthur bursts in without knocking.

My office is both sanctum and sanctuary. A place of dignified quiet, as befits the founder of the originating and most successful manufacturers of inexpensive, all-season wardrobes for the soon-to-depart. I take pardonable pride in my company, which has held steadfast in the market for twenty-five years. On one wall is a hologram of our tasteful slogan: *Leave your loved ones all they deserve*. On another is an artfully framed copy of our first AARP online advertisement, which I wrote when I was Arthur's age and which set the standard not only for Eve of Beyond but for all our many imitators: "A Message for All Advanced Seniors: Why throw away your hard-earned savings on clothing you will most likely wear for only a short time? For a fraction of the price charged by most retail outlets, Eve of Beyond will provide you with beautiful non-durable tunics and other garments guaranteed *not* to outlast you, and which your heirs can, without guilt, embarrassment, or financial loss, simply discard after your passage."

Arthur, however, does not respect either my privacy or the nobility of our chosen profession. A man of thirty-four with the fumbling gestures and naiveté of a teenager, he rushes red-faced to my desk, waving some sort of document and shouting excited words I am unable to comprehend until I give the disconnect command to the virtual display.

"Ninety million global credits! Ninety million global credits!"

"Lower your voice," I say. "I'm not deaf."

"Ninety million global credits," he repeats. His face is puffed with avarice and self-importance, the dimples in his cheeks like miniature dollar signs. "That's how much they're offering now, up five million."

"How much who is offering for what?"

"Heaven-Sent Garments, of course. For Eve of Beyond."

I look at him with a mixture of tolerance and distaste. He is, after all, my son—all I have left now that Susan is gone. But he is also overweight, overbearing, and something of a scoundrel. I wonder, not for the first time, where Susan and I went wrong.

"I thought I told you not to contact those people," I say.

"I didn't," he says. "They contacted me. It's a once-in-a-lifetime offer; I've already given it to our lawyers to look over. All we have to do is sign and we'll be rich. I can buy that ski lodge in Aspen I've always wanted. You can retire, go anywhere you want, even live in luxury in New Europe—"

"And wouldn't you like that?" I say. "Well, forget it. How many times do I have to tell you and the board and the lawyers that I refuse to sell?"

"Didn't you hear what I said, old man? Ninety million global credits!"

Old man. Arthur seems to think that I am as feeble as many of our customers. The business has taken over his insufficient faculties, to the point where he sees senility everywhere—including in his vigorous, fifty-nine-year-old father.

"It could be a hundred and fifty million," I say, "and still I wouldn't agree to sell."

"Why not? Why are you so damn stubborn? Heaven-Sent owns all our major competitors already, as well as most of the regular clothing manufacturers. We can't hold out on them much longer, they'll grind us out of business if we try. They're big, they're enormously powerful—"

"And corrupt," I say. "They've taken an honorable, even a noble business and turned it into something shadowy, money-grubbing, conscienceless."

"Shadowy? What do you mean, shadowy?"

"Exactly what I said. I don't trust them. I don't trust their motives."

"Their motives are the same as ours, only more ambitious. They'll sell far more Eve of Beyond clothing than we do and double or triple our present profit margin."

So cold and cynical, this son of mine. At times like this I wish I had never granted him a full partnership in Eve of Beyond.

"You know that's not the only reason I founded the company," I say, hurt. "We're a compassionate business, filling a genuine human need. Heaven-Sent Garments has no compassion. They worship at the shrine of Mammon."

Arthur wipes his round face. His cheeks and forehead are the color of port wine. Apoplectic, I think sadly. I won't be surprised if he has a stroke or a coronary before the age of forty-five.

"I suppose you've been listening to those scurrilous rumors," he says.

"What scurrilous rumors?"

"The ones spread by the Hereafter Habiliments people. They're just bitter because they held out too long, were forced to sell to Heaven-Sent for fewer credits than they hoped to get."

"I haven't heard any such rumors. What do they say?"

"Never mind what they say. The rumors aren't true, that's the point," Arthur says. "I'm not going to argue with you any more about this, old man. You turned over 40 percent of Eve of Beyond to me, remember? I shouldn't have to keep reminding you of that. I intend to sell Heaven-Sent my interest immediately and urge the members of the Board to do the same, and if you hold out, then you'll just have to suffer the consequences."

He turns, stomps to the door, flings it open, slams it behind him. I stare at the closed door, consumed by sadness and anger. Mostly anger. Arthur does not understand and never will what Eve of Beyond means to me.

I founded the company as a practical and benevolent service industry, to right what I believed then and still believe now was a terrible wrong: that the soon-to-depart were either compelled to pay the same price for clothing as healthy people twenty to thirty years younger, or to purchase whatever poor quality castoffs could

be found in the ever-dwindling number of charitable thrift shops. This inequity was a result, of course, of society's refusal to cope with death in a realistic fashion. Perishability in the clothing business, I determined, could and should be a virtue rather than a point of contention. Operating on that simple principle, Eve of Beyond has not only achieved success but in its own way has rewarded, even honored, its thousands of satisfied customers.

But now this business I have nurtured for so long is in imminent danger of being taken over by Heaven-Sent Garments—a division of International Interests Corporation, another of the vast, soulless conglomerates that seek to control all types of global commerce. If they gain control of Eve of Beyond, they will have a monopoly on the nondurable market. And they will certainly destroy the firm's principles and respectability by cutting corners, establishing "more cost efficient" means of ministering to the clothing needs of the soon-to-depart by downsizing to the cheapest synthetics. All service and customer dignity would be lost.

I am even more adamantly determined now not to sell. And I must try to prevent Arthur from selling. We each own 40 percent of the voting stock; the other 20 percent is divided among the five members of our board of directors. Those five surely will continue to side with me as they have in the past.

There is a board meeting scheduled in three days; I make arrangements for it to be moved up to tomorrow afternoon. Then I attempt to find out the nature of the "scurrilous rumors" Arthur alluded to by getting in touch with George Metz, a former employee who, with my blessing, left Eve of Beyond to form Hereafter Habiliments a dozen years ago. He and I have maintained a cordial relationship despite the fact that we are, or were, competitors. I do not believe that he would spread rumors of any type, no matter what Arthur says, but he may well have an idea of what is going on with Heaven-Sent. But I am told by a woman in George's former office that his services were terminated after the takeover. An effort to reach him at home also fails. I leave a video message, asking him to contact me at his earliest convenience.

No one else I talk to in the clothing profession is willing or able to discuss the rumors. Everyone seems afraid of Heaven-Sent, or rather of its global parent, International Interests Corporation. I sense dark and ugly things swimming beneath the surface of their operations. Perhaps I should be afraid, too, but I'm not. Righteous anger still dominates my emotions.

I determine to have another talk with Arthur, but he has left for the day and is not expected back. No one seems to know where he can be found.

A short while later I receive two VisPhone calls. The first is from Harold Reedus, of Reedus, Reedus, and DeCarlo, the law firm that has represented Eve of Beyond since its inception. Harold is the son of Benjamin Reedus, an old friend and confidante who, unhappily, retired to Florida two years ago. He possesses a cunning legal mind, but like Arthur and unlike his father, has little or no compassion. Another son who has failed to live up to his parents' hopes and expectations. After a careful review of the offer sheet from Heaven-Sent, Harold says, he considers it not only fair and reasonable but quite generous. He strongly advises me to sell, and says that he will tender the same advice to members of the Board "in the best interests of all concerned." Nothing I say to the contrary has any effect on his position.

The second call is from Delbert P. Jones, Executive in Charge of New Acquisitions for Heaven-Sent Garments. I almost refuse to talk to him. I have had conversations with Jones before, in person and on the VisPhone, and cannot stand the man. His manner is both unctuous and faintly menacing, his smile as devoid of warmth and humor as a shark's. But avoiding him will serve no purpose except to make him believe I am as afraid of him and his conglomerate bosses as all the other clothing manufacturers.

Jones wastes no time with amenities. "I understand your son Arthur and your firm's attorney have urged you to accept our latest offer, but that you still refuse to sell your shares. Isn't 40 percent of ninety million credits enough for you, Mr. Kampman?"

"Money has nothing to do with it," I say. "As I've told you before, it's a matter of honor and pride."

"Pride goeth before a fall," he says cryptically.

Lies, obfuscations, clichés—those are Heaven-Sent's stocks in trade. "Are you threatening me, Jones?"

"Would it make a difference to you if I was?"

"No, damn you. I refuse to sell my shares no matter what you say or do."

He takes a different tack. "If I were to tell you you'd be retained as Eve of Beyond's president and CEO, would you be more inclined to be reasonable?"

"Is that what you promised George Metz? That he'd be retained as president and CEO of Hereafter Habiliments?"

"He would have been," Jones says, "if he'd exhibited a more cooperative attitude."

I look at his shark-smiling face on the screen, his massive body encased in a form-fitting silk tunic that must have cost as much as fifty of Eve of Beyond's nondurables, his sumptuously appointed office. This man, this money-oozing puppet, could tell me that the Earth revolved around the Sun and I would not trust him or his motives in making the claim.

"For the last time," I say, "Eve of Beyond is not for sale, now or ever."

"You mean your 40 percent isn't."

"Not my 40 percent and not the 20 percent owned by our stockholders. You may be able to coerce my son, but not the rest of us."

"No? We'll see about that."

He pushes a button and the screen goes dark.

George Metz returns my call as I am about to leave for home. He looks and sounds old, worn out, nervous. He denies spreading rumors about Heaven-Sent, seems hesitant when I ask if he has heard any. At length he agrees to talk to me, but not on the Vis-Phone. Over drinks at "the place where we used to go when I worked for Eve of Beyond."

I take one of the new skycabs to the Mission Towers Hotel, then a high-speed elevator to the rooftop lounge with its sweeping views of the city. George is waiting for me, a large glass of whiskey in front of him. His eyes have a glaze that tells me the drink is neither his first nor will it be his last of the day.

"I shouldn't have come here," he says morosely.

"Why not?"

"Not in my best interest. Or yours, Kampman."

"Well, we're both here now," I say. "Tell me about these Heaven-Sent rumors."

He drinks deeply, seems to struggle with himself, finally leans forward and says in an undertone, "Not Heaven-Sent—International Interests Corporation."

"What about them?"

"It's all over, you know. For you, me, all of us. You can't resist these people, Kampman. No, they aren't people, they're machines. Machines."

"If you feel that way, why did you sell out to them?"

"I had no choice. Neither do you. Neither does anybody, anywhere."

"You're not making sense."

"The clothing business is only a small part of their operation," Metz whispers. "A very small part. Why limit themselves? Eh? Yes, and why limit profits when it's so easy to broaden the customer base and increase the profit margin, in our field and every other?"

I stare at him. He seems in very poor health, and not only because of his drinking. Disconnected, too. Weighted, fruited with sorrow and preoccupation. He is a dozen

years younger than me, yet in the dim light of the lounge he resembles a model customer for Eve of Beyond.

"What are you trying to say, Metz?"

He finishes his drink, glances furtively in the direction of the door. "You can't beat them," he says. "Can't beat any of these huge global corporations. They're already in control and their plans aren't our plans. Don't you see that? Can't you see the shape of the future?"

"No, I can't."

"All right then, forget it. Forget we had this conversation. I've already said too much." Metz stumbles to his feet, lurches a few steps toward the door, then turns back. "You'll find out, Kampman," he says. "Sooner or later, you'll find out."

I should have realized what the outcome of the board meeting would be, that it was in fact inevitable, pre-ordained. But I didn't. I truly believed that my will would prevail.

I spoke at considerable length, reiterating my position, with passion and eloquence. Emphasized the need to maintain Eve of Beyond's high professional and moral standards by continuing to provide nondurable clothing that does not sacrifice stylishness or grace, that allows our aged customers to depart with dignity. Urged the others to remember the slogan by which we have operated for a quarter of a century: *Leave your loved ones all they deserve*.

My arguments, of course, fell on deaf ears. Arthur's rebuttal, bolstered by Harold Reedus's ardent recommendation, left nothing to reason or any other possibility. The five non-family board members, men and women I have known for many years, considered trusted friends who shared my ideals, were in the end overcome by greed. Shares in ninety million global credits were too much for any of them to resist.

The final vote is 6-1. Heaven-Sent Garments is now the controlling owner of Eve of Beyond.

I expect Arthur to revel in his triumph after the meeting ends, but he doesn't. He seems to be almost pleading when he says, "Come to your senses, old man. Do yourself a favor, me a favor, and agree to join the rest of us."

"Never," I say.

"What good will holding out do you? The company's not yours or mine any longer. If you hold onto your shares, you know you'll be replaced as president and CEO as soon as the legal documents are signed."

"That doesn't mean I have to give up, give in. I'll hire new lawyers, I'll fight the takeover—"

"On what grounds? You wouldn't stand a chance. Heaven-Sent and International Interests have batteries of lawyers a lot more high-powered than any you can hire." Arthur shakes his head and his fat cheeks wobble like globes of pudding. "Damn it, old man, why do you have to be so stubborn? They're not going to let you get away with any disruption of their agenda."

"What agenda?"

"Think of the money, can't you? Think of the life of luxury you can have for a while on 40 percent of ninety million credits."

"What do you mean, 'for a while'?"

His eyes shift away from mine. "I'm only thinking of your welfare," he says. "But there's nothing I can do if you won't listen to reason. Absolutely nothing. It's all on your head now."

As Arthur shambles away I see Metz's face hovering as if in a haze, hear him say, *They're already in control and their plans aren't our plans. You'll find out, Kampman. Sooner or later, you'll find out.*

\* \* \*

The next few days are a blur. Despite my bravado with Arthur, there is virtually nothing I can do now to save my company or maintain its untarnished image. With rapid dispatch I am deemed persona non grata at Eve of Beyond, my office taken over by an expensively dressed stranger who resembles Delbert P. Jones. I can only sit in my empty flat, a broken and beaten man with nowhere to go and nothing to do. No one calls or comes to see me to commiserate. Arthur does not come to see me. I am completely alone.

On the fifth day after the takeover, the doorbell finally rings. I open the door without bothering to look first at the viewscreen, thinking it might be George Metz or another old and sympathetic acquaintance. No. A man in uniform stands in the hallway, a large plain box in his hands.

"Delivery for Mr. Chester Kampman," he says. He hands me the box, then extends an electronic tracking device and stylus. "Sign here, please."

I sign automatically, and when I return the items to him my eyes focus for the first time on the emblem on the pocket of his uniform. A blue and white emblem with bold lettering that spells Heaven-Sent Garments.

Blindly I carry the box inside and let it fall to the floor. I do not need to open it to know that it contains a plain tunic and bare-necessity accessories. One box—one complete outfit of Heaven-Sent menswear of the cheapest manufacture, designed to last no more than a few months. One and only one.

I know other things then, too, with a sudden and terrible clarity. I know what Metz meant about the nondurable clothing business being but one small cog in International Interests Corporation's long range plans, and what he was trying to tell me about the shape of the future. I know the lengths to which the mega-conglomerate can and will go to eliminate competitors and dissidents in order to achieve their monstrous purpose. And I know the meaning of Arthur's words to me after the board meeting, and the full scope of his betrayal.

My son has not only sold them my livelihood and my life's work.

He has sold them my life. ○

## TOWER



I stare at the stones,  
grey as my days  
and the little gray mouse  
who has found its way in.  
A lifetime I am to stay  
with only you to hear my prayers  
and carry them out  
through the holes in the thick walls.  
My fingernails are broken now;  
I cannot attempt another escape.  
But I have found  
the small barred window  
where I sing each morning  
to any passing prince.  
Be he large or small, handsome or plain,  
I will have him.  
Pride and honor are broken now  
On this rack of grey.  
—Jane Yolen

After working as a research biologist in various universities, including Oxford and UCLA, and as a lecturer in botany at St. Andrews University, Paul McAuley is now a full-time writer. His first novel, *Four Hundred Billion Stars*, won the Philip K. Dick Memorial Award; his fifth, *Fairyland*, won the Arthur C. Clarke and John W. Campbell Awards. His other novels include *The Secret of Life*, *Whole Wide World*, *White Devils*, *The Quiet War*, and *Gardens of the Sun*. His latest, *Cowboy Angels*, has just been published in the United States by Pyr Books. Paul's last story for us, "Dead Men Walking" appeared in our March 2006 issue. After too long an absence, he returns to our pages with a compelling coming-of-age tale about an unsettling future and two boys who must make . . .

# THE CHOICE

Paul McAuley

In the night, tides and a brisk wind drove a raft of bubbleweed across the Flood and piled it up along the north side of the island. Soon after first light, Lucas started raking it up, ferrying load after load to one of the compost pits, where it would rot down into a nutrient-rich liquid fertilizer. He was trundling his wheelbarrow down the steep path to the shore for about the thirtieth or fortieth time when he spotted someone walking across the water: Damian, moving like a cross-country skier as he traversed the channel between the island and the stilt huts and floating tanks of his father's shrimp farm. It was still early in the morning, already hot. A perfect September day, the sky's blue dome untroubled by cloud. Shifting points of sunlight starred the water, flashed from the blades of the farm's wind turbine. Lucas waved to his friend and Damian waved back and nearly overbalanced, windmilling his arms and recovering, slogging on.

They met at the water's edge. Damian, picking his way between floating slicks of red weed, called out breathlessly, "Did you hear?"

"Hear what?"

"A dragon got itself stranded close to Martham."

"You're kidding."

"I'm not kidding. An honest-to-God sea dragon."

Damian stepped onto an apron of broken brick at the edge of the water and sat down and eased off the fat flippers of his Jesus shoes, explaining that he'd heard about it from Ritchy, the foreman of the shrimp farm, who'd got it off the skipper of a supply barge who'd been listening to chatter on the common band.

"It beached not half an hour ago. People reckon it came in through the cut at

Horsey and couldn't get back over the bar when the tide turned. So it went on up the channel of the old riverbed until it ran ashore."

Lucas thought for a moment. "There's a sand bar that hooks into the channel south of Martham. I went past it any number of times when I worked on Grant Higgins's boat last summer, ferrying oysters to Norwich."

"It's almost on our doorstep," Damian said. He pulled his phone from the pocket of his shorts and angled it toward Lucas. "Right about here. See it?"

"I know where Martham is. Let me guess—you want me to take you."

"What's the point of building a boat if you don't use it? Come on, L. It isn't every day an alien machine washes up."

Lucas took off his broad-brimmed straw hat, blotted his forehead with his wrist, and set his hat on his head again. He was a wiry boy not quite sixteen, bare-chested in baggy shorts and sandals he'd cut from an old car tire. "I was planning to go crabbing. After I finish clearing this weed, water the vegetable patch, fix lunch for my mother . . ."

"I'll give you a hand with all that when we get back."

"Right."

"If you really don't want to go I could maybe borrow your boat."

"Or you could take one of your dad's."

"After what he did to me last time? I'd rather row there in that leaky old clunker of your mother's. Or walk."

"That would be a sight."

Damian smiled. He was just two months older than Lucas, tall and sturdy, his cropped blond hair bleached by salt and summer sun, his nose and the rims of his ears pink and peeling. The two had been friends for as long as they could remember.

He said, "I reckon I can sail as well as you."

"You're sure this dragon is still there? You have pictures?"

"Not exactly. It knocked out the town's broadband, and everything else. According to the guy who talked to Ritchy, nothing electronic works within a klick of it. Phones, slates, radios, nothing. The tide turns in a couple of hours, but I reckon we can get there if we start right away."

"Maybe. I should tell my mother," Lucas said. "In the unlikely event that she wonders where I am."

"How is she?"

"No better, no worse. Does your dad know you're skipping out?"

"Don't worry about it. I'll tell him I went crabbing with you."

"Fill a couple of jugs at the still," Lucas said. "And pull up some carrots, too. But first, hand me your phone."

"The GPS coordinates are flagged up right there. You ask it, it'll plot a course."

Lucas took the phone, holding it with his fingertips—he didn't like the way it squirmed as it shaped itself to fit in his hand. "How do you switch it off?"

"What do you mean?"

"If we go, we won't be taking the phone. Your dad could track us."

"How will we find our way there?"

"I don't need your phone to find Martham."

"You and your off-the-grid horseshit," Damian said.

"You wanted an adventure," Lucas said. "This is it."

When Lucas started to tell his mother that he'd be out for the rest of the day with Damian, she said, "Chasing after that so-called dragon, I suppose. No need to look surprised—it's all over the news. Not the official news, of course. No mention of it there. But it's leaking out everywhere that counts."

His mother was propped against the headboard of the double bed under the caravan's big end window. Julia Wittstruck, fifty-two, skinny as a refugee, dressed in a striped Berber robe and half-covered in a patchwork of quilts and thin orange blankets stamped with the Oxfam logo. The ropes of her dreadlocks were tied back with a red bandana; her tablet resting in her lap.

She gave Lucas her best inscrutable look and said, "I suppose this is Damian's idea. You be careful. His ideas usually work out badly."

"That's why I'm going along. To make sure he doesn't get into trouble. He's set on seeing it, one way or another."

"And you aren't?"

Lucas smiled. "I suppose I'm curious. Just a little."

"I wish I could go. Take a rattle can or two, spray the old slogans on the damned thing's hide."

"I could put some cushions in the boat. Make you as comfortable as you like."

Lucas knew that his mother wouldn't take up his offer. She rarely left the caravan, hadn't been off the island for more than three years. A multilocus immunotoxic syndrome, basically an allergic reaction to the myriad products and pollutants of the anthropocene age, had left her more or less completely bedridden. She'd refused all offers of treatment or help by the local social agencies, relying instead on the services of a local witchwoman who visited once a week, and spent her days in bed, working at her tablet. She trawled government sites and stealthnets, made podcasts, advised zero-impact communities, composed critiques and manifestos. She kept a public journal, wrote essays and opinion pieces (at the moment, she was especially exercised by attempts by multinational companies to move in on the Antarctic Peninsula, and a utopian group that was using alien technology to build a floating community on a drowned coral reef in the Midway Islands), and maintained friendships, alliances, and several rancorous feuds with former colleagues whose origins had long been forgotten by both sides. In short, hers was a way of life that would have been familiar to scholars from any time in the past couple of millennia.

She'd been a lecturer in philosophy at Birkbeck College before the nuclear strikes, riots, revolutions, and netwar skirmishes of the so-called Spasm, which had ended when the floppy ships of the Jackaroo had appeared in the skies over Earth. In exchange for rights to the outer solar system, the aliens had given the human race technology to clean up the Earth, and access to a wormhole network that linked a dozen M-class red dwarf stars. Soon enough, other alien species showed up, making various deals with various nations and power blocs, bartering advanced technologies for works of art, fauna and flora, the secret formula of Coca Cola, and other unique items.

Most believed that the aliens were kindly and benevolent saviors, members of a loose alliance that had traced ancient broadcasts of *I Love Lucy* to their origin and arrived just in time to save the human species from the consequences of its monkey cleverness. But a vocal minority wanted nothing to do with them, doubting that their motives were in any way altruistic, elaborating all kinds of theories about their true motivations. We should choose to reject the help of the aliens, they said. We should reject easy fixes and the magic of advanced technologies we don't understand, and choose the harder thing: to keep control of our own destiny.

Julia Wittstruck had become a leading light in this movement. When its brief but fierce round of global protests and politicking had fallen apart in a mess of mutual recriminations and internecine warfare, she'd moved to Scotland and joined a group of green radicals who'd been building a self-sufficient settlement on a trio of ancient oil rigs in the Firth of Forth. But they'd become compromised too, according to Julia, so she'd left them and taken up with Lucas's father (Lucas knew almost nothing

about him—his mother said that the past was the past, that she was all that counted in his life because she had given birth to him and raised and taught him), and they'd lived the gypsy life for a few years until she'd split up with him and, pregnant with her son, had settled in a smallholding in Norfolk, living off the grid, supported by a small legacy left to her by one of her devoted supporters from the glory days of the anti-alien protests.

When she'd first moved there, the coast had been more than ten kilometers to the east, but a steady rise in sea level had flooded the northern and eastern coasts of Britain and Europe. East Anglia had been sliced in two by levees built to protect precious farmland from the encroaching sea, and most people caught on the wrong side had taken resettlement grants and moved on. But Julia had stayed put. She'd paid a contractor to extend a small rise, all that was left of her smallholding, with rubble from a wrecked twentieth-century housing estate, and made her home on the resulting island. It had once been much larger, and a succession of people had camped there, attracted by her kudos, driven away after a few weeks or a few months by her scorn and impatience. Then most of Greenland's remaining icecap collapsed into the Arctic Ocean, sending a surge of water across the North Sea.

Lucas had only been six, but he still remembered everything about that day. The water had risen past the high tide mark that afternoon and had kept rising. At first it had been fun to mark the stealthy progress of the water with a series of sticks driven into the ground, but by evening it was clear that it was not going to stop anytime soon, and then in a sudden smooth rush it rose more than a hundred centimeters, flooding the vegetable plots and lapping at the timber baulks on which the caravan rested. All that evening, Julia had moved their possessions out of the caravan, with Lucas trotting to and fro at her heels, helping her as best he could until, some time after midnight, she'd given up and they'd fallen asleep under a tent rigged from chairs and a blanket. And had woken to discover that their island had shrunk to half its previous size, and the caravan had floated off and lay canted and half-drowned in muddy water littered with every kind of debris.

Julia had bought a replacement caravan and set it on the highest point of what was left of the island, and despite ineffectual attempts to remove them by various local government officials, she and Lucas had stayed on. She'd taught him the basics of numeracy and literacy, and the long and intricate secret history of the world, and he'd learned field- and wood- and watercraft from their neighbors. He snared rabbits and mink in the woods that ran alongside the levee, foraged for hedgerow fruits and edible weeds and fungi, bagged squirrels with small stones shot from his catapult. He grubbed mussels from the rusting car-reef that protected the seaward side of the levee, set wicker traps for eels and trotlines for mitten crabs. He fished for mackerel and dogfish and weaverfish on the wide brown waters of the Flood. When he could, he worked shifts on the shrimp farm owned by Damian's father, or on the market gardens, farms, and willow and bamboo plantations on the other side of the levee.

In spring, he watched long vees of geese fly north above the floodwater that stretched out to the horizon. In autumn, he watched them fly south.

He'd inherited a great deal of his mother's restlessness and fierce independence, but although he longed to strike out beyond his little world, he didn't know how to begin. And besides, he had to look after Julia. She would never admit it, but she depended on him, utterly.

She said now, dismissing his offer to take her along, "You know I have too much to do here. The day is never long enough. There is something you can do for me, though. Take my phone with you."

"Damian says phones don't work around the dragon."

"I'm sure it will work fine. Take some pictures of that thing. As many as you can. I'll write up your story when you come back, and pictures will help attract traffic."

"Okay."

Lucas knew that there was no point in arguing. Besides, his mother's phone was an ancient model that predated the Spasm: it lacked any kind of cloud connectivity and was as dumb as a box of rocks. As long as he only used it to take pictures, it wouldn't compromise his idea of an off-the-grid adventure.

His mother smiled. "ET go home."

"ET go home?"

"We put that up everywhere, back in the day. We put it on the main runway of Luton Airport, in letters twenty meters tall. Also dug trenches in the shape of the words up on the South Downs and filled them with diesel fuel and set them alight. You could see it from space. Let the unhuman know that they were not welcome here. That we did not need them. Check the toolbox. I'm sure there's a rattle can in there. Take it along, just in case."

"I'll take my catapult, in case I spot any ducks. I'll try to be back before it gets dark. If I don't, there are MREs in the store cupboard. And I picked some tomatoes and carrots."

"ET go home," his mother said. "Don't forget that. And be careful, in that little boat."

Lucas had started to build his sailboat late last summer, and had worked at it all through the winter. It was just four meters from bow to stern, its plywood hull glued with epoxy and braced with ribs shaped from branches of a young poplar tree that had fallen in the autumn gales. He'd used an adze and a homemade plane to fashion the mast and boom from the poplar's trunk, knocked up the knees, gunwale, outboard support, and bow cap from oak, persuaded Ritchy, the shrimp farm's foreman, to print off the cleats, oarlocks, bow eye and grommets for lacing the sails on the farm's maker. Ritchy had given him some half-empty tins of blue paint and varnish to seal the hull, and he'd bought a set of secondhand laminate sails from the shipyard in Halvergate, and spliced the halyards and sheet from scrap lengths of rope.

He loved his boat more than he was ready to admit to himself. That spring he'd tacked back and forth beyond the shrimp farm, had sailed north to along the coast to Halvergate and Acle, and south and west around Reedham Point as far as Brundall, and had crossed the channel of the river and navigated the mazy mudflats to Chedgrave. If the sea dragon was stuck where Damian said it was, he'd have to travel farther than ever before, navigating uncharted and ever-shifting sand and mud banks, dodging clippers and barge strings in the shipping channel. But Lucas reckoned he had the measure of his little boat now, and it was a fine day and a steady wind blowing from the west drove them straight along, with the jib cocked as far as it would go in the stay and the mainsail bellying full and the boat heeling sharply as it ploughed a white furrow in the light chop.

At first, all Lucas had to do was sit in the stern with the tiller snug in his right armpit and the main sheet coiled loosely in his left hand, and keep a straight course north past the pens and catwalks of the shrimp farm. Damian sat beside him, leaning out to port to counterbalance the boat's tilt, his left hand keeping the jib sheet taut, his right holding a plastic cup he would now and then use to scoop water from the bottom of the boat and fling in a sparkling arc that was caught and twisted by the wind.

The sun stood high in a tall blue sky empty of cloud save for a thin rim at the horizon to the northeast. Fret, most likely, mist forming where moisture condensed out of air that had cooled as it passed over the sea. But the fret was kilometers away, and all around sunlight flashed from every wave top and burned on the white sails and

beat down on the two boys. Damian's face and bare torso shone with sunblock; although Lucas was about as dark as he got, he'd rubbed sunblock on his face too, and tied his straw hat under his chin and put on a shirt that flapped about his chest. The tiller juddered minutely and constantly as the boat slapped through an endless succession of catpaw waves and Lucas measured the flex of the sail by the tug of the sheet wrapped around his left hand, kept an eye on the foxtail streamer that flew from the top of the mast. Judging by landmarks on the levee that ran along the shore to port, they were making around fifteen kilometers per hour, about as fast as Lucas had ever gotten out of his boat, and he and Damian grinned at each other and squinted off into the glare of the sunstruck water, happy and exhilarated to be skimming across the face of the Flood, two bold adventurers off to confront a monster.

"We'll be there in an hour easy," Damian said.

"A bit less than two, maybe. As long as the fret stays where it is."

"The sun'll burn it off."

"Hasn't managed it yet."

"Don't let your natural caution spoil a perfect day."

Lucas swung wide of a raft of bubbleweed that glistened like a slick of fresh blood in the sun. Some called it Martian weed, though it had nothing to do with any of the aliens; it was an engineered species designed to mop up nitrogen and phosphorous released by drowned farmland, prospering beyond all measure or control.

Dead ahead, a long line of whitecaps marked the reef of the old railway embankment. Lucas swung the tiller into the wind and he and Damian ducked as the boom swung across and the boat gybed around. The sails slackened, then filled with wind again as the boat turned toward one of the gaps blown in the embankment, cutting so close to the buoy that marked it that Damian could reach out and slap the rusty steel plate of its flank as they went by. And then they were heading out across a broad reach, with the little town of Acle strung along a low promontory to port. A slateless church steeple stood up from the water like a skeletal lighthouse. The polished cross at its top burned like a flame in the sunlight. A file of old pylons stepped away, most canted at steep angles, the twiggy platforms of heron nests built in angles of their girder work, whitened everywhere with droppings. One of the few still standing straight had been colonized by fisherfolk, with shacks built from driftwood lashed to its struts and a wave-powered generator made from oil drums strung out beyond. Washing flew like festive flags inside the web of rusted steel, and a naked small child of indeterminate sex clung to the unshuttered doorway of a shack just above the waterline, pushing a tangle of hair from its eyes as it watched the little boat sail by.

They passed small islands fringed with young mangrove trees; an engineered species that was rapidly spreading from areas in the south where they'd been planted to replace the levee. Lucas spotted a marsh harrier patrolling mudflats in the lee of one island, scrying for water voles and mitten crabs. They passed a long building sunk to the tops of its second-story windows in the flood, with brightly colored plastic bubbles pitched on its flat roof among the notched and spinning wheels of windmill generators, and small boats bobbing alongside. Someone standing at the edge of the roof waved to them, and Damian stood up and waved back and the boat shifted so that he had to catch at the jib leech and sit down hard.

"You want us to capsize, go ahead," Lucas told him.

"There are worse places to be shipwrecked. You know they're all married to each other over there."

"I heard."

"They like visitors too."

"I know you aren't talking from experience or you'd have told me all about it. At least a dozen times."

"I met a couple of them in Halvergate. They said I should stop by some time," Damian said, grinning sideways at Lucas. "We could maybe think about doing that on the way back."

"And get stripped of everything we own, and thrown in the water."

"You have a trusting nature, don't you?"

"If you mean, I'm not silly enough to think they'll welcome us in and let us take our pick of their women, then I guess I do."

"She was awful pretty, the woman. And not much older than me."

"And the rest of them are seahags older than your great-grandmother."

"That one time with my father . . . She was easily twice my age and I didn't mind a bit."

A couple of months ago, Damian's sixteenth birthday, his father had taken him to a pub in Norwich where women stripped at the bar and afterward walked around bare naked, collecting tips from the customers. Damian's father had paid one of them to look after his son, and Damian hadn't stopped talking about it ever since, making plans to go back on his own or to take Lucas with him that so far hadn't amounted to anything.

Damian watched the half-drowned building dwindle into the glare striking off the water and said, "If we ever ran away we could live in a place like that."

"You could, maybe," Lucas said. "I'd want to keep moving. But I suppose I could come back and visit now and then."

"I don't mean *that* place. I mean a place like it. Must be plenty of them, on those alien worlds up in the sky. There's oceans on one of them. First Foot."

"I know."

"And alien ruins on all of them. There are people walking about up there right now. On all those new worlds. And most people sit around like . . . like bloody stumps. Old tree stumps stuck in mud."

"I'm not counting on winning the ticket lottery," Lucas said. "Sailing south, that would be pretty fine. To Africa, or Brazil, or these islands people are building in the Pacific. Or even all the way to Antarctica."

"Soon as you stepped ashore, L, you'd be eaten by a polar bear."

"Polar bears lived in the north when there were polar bears."

"Killer penguins then. Giant penguins with razors in their flippers and lasers for eyes."

"No such thing."

"The !Cha made sea dragons, didn't they? So why not giant robot killer penguins? Your mother should look into it."

"That's not funny."

"Didn't mean anything by it. Just joking, is all."

"You go too far sometimes."

They sailed in silence for a little while, heading west across the deepwater channel. A clipper moved far off to starboard, cylinder sails spinning slowly, white as salt in the middle of a flat vastness that shimmered like shot silk under the hot blue sky. Some way beyond it, a tug was dragging a string of barges south. The shoreline of Thurne Point emerged from the heat haze, standing up from mud banks cut by a web of narrow channels, and they turned east, skirting stands of sea grass that spread out into the open water. It was a little colder now, and the wind was blowing more from the northwest than the west. Lucas thought that the bank of fret looked closer, too. When he pointed it out, Damian said it was still klicks and klicks off, and besides, they were headed straight to their prize now.

"If it's still there," Lucas said.

"It isn't going anywhere, not with the tide all the way out."

"You really are an expert on this alien stuff, aren't you?"

"Just keep heading north, L."

"That's exactly what I'm doing."

"I'm sorry about that crack about your mother. I didn't mean anything by it. Okay?"

"Okay."

"I like to kid around," Damian said. "But I'm serious about getting out of here. Remember that time two years ago, we hiked into Norwich, found the army offices?"

"I remember the sergeant there gave us cups of tea and biscuits and told us to come back when we were old enough."

"He's still there. That sergeant. Same bloody biscuits, too."

"Wait. You went to join up without telling me?"

"I went to find out if I could. After my birthday. Turns out the army takes people our age, but you need the permission of your parents. So that was that."

"You didn't even try to talk to your father about it?"

"He has me working for him, L. Why would he sign away good cheap labor? I did try, once. He was half-cut and in a good mood. What passes for a good mood as far as he's concerned, any rate. Mellowed out on beer and superfine skunk. But he wouldn't hear anything about it. And then he got all the way flat-out drunk and he beat on me. Told me to never mention it again."

Lucas looked over at his friend and said, "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"I can join under my own signature when I'm eighteen, not before," Damian said. "No way out of here until then, unless I run away or win the lottery."

"So are you thinking of running away?"

"I'm damned sure not counting on winning the lottery. And even if I do, you have to be eighteen before they let you ship out. Just like the fucking army." Damian looked at Lucas, looked away. "He'll probably bash all kinds of shit out of me, for taking off like this."

"You can stay over tonight. He'll be calmer, tomorrow."

Damian shook his head. "He'll only come looking for me. And I don't want to cause trouble for you and your mother."

"It wouldn't be any trouble."

"Yeah, it would. But thanks anyway." Damian paused, then said, "I don't care what he does to me anymore. You know? All I think is, one day I'll be able to beat up on him."

"You say that but you don't mean it."

"Longer I stay here, the more I become like him."

"I don't see it ever happening."

Damian shrugged.

"I really don't," Lucas said.

"Fuck him," Damian said. "I'm not going to let him spoil this fine day."

"Our grand adventure."

"The wind's changing again."

"I think the fret's moving in, too."

"Maybe it is, a little. But we can't turn back, L. Not now."

The bank of cloud across the horizon was about a klick away, reaching up so high that it blurred and dimmed the sun. The air was colder and the wind was shifting minute by minute. Damian put on his shirt, holding the jib sheet in his teeth as he punched his arms into the sleeves. They tacked to swing around a long reach of grass, and as they came about saw a white wall sitting across the water, dead ahead.

Lucas pushed the tiller to leeward. The boat slowed at once and swung around to face the wind.

"What's the problem?" Damian said. "It's just a bit of mist."

Lucas caught the boom as it swung, held it steady. "We'll sit tight for a spell. See if the fret burns off."

"And meanwhile the tide'll turn and lift off the fucking dragon."

"Not for a while."

"We're almost there."

"You don't like it, you can swim."

"I might." Damian peered at the advancing fret. "Think the dragon has something to do with this?"

"I think it's just fret."

"Maybe it's hiding from something looking for it. We're drifting backward," Damian said. "Is that part of your plan?"

"We're over the river channel, in the main current. Too deep for my anchor. See those dead trees at the edge of the grass? That's where I'm aiming. We can sit it out there."

"I hear something," Damian said.

Lucas heard it too. The ripping roar of a motor driven at full speed, coming closer. He looked over his shoulder, saw a shadow condense inside the mist and gain shape and solidity: a cabin cruiser shouldering through windblown tendrils at the base of the bank of mist, driving straight down the main channel at full speed, its wake spreading wide on either side.

In a moment of chill clarity Lucas saw what was going to happen. He shouted to Damian, telling him to duck, and let the boom go and shoved the tiller to starboard. The boom banged around as the sail bellied and the boat started to turn, but the cruiser was already on them, roaring past just ten meters away, and the broad smooth wave of its wake hit the boat broadside and lifted it and shoved it sideways toward a stand of dead trees. Lucas gave up any attempt to steer and unwound the main halyard from its cleat. Damian grabbed an oar and used it to push the boat away from the first of the trees, but their momentum swung them into two more. The wet black stump of a branch scraped along the side and the boat heeled and water poured in over the thwart. For a moment Lucas thought they would capsize; then something thumped into the mast and the boat sat up again. Shards of rotten wood dropped down with a dry clatter and they were suddenly still, caught among dead and half-drowned trees.

The damage wasn't as bad as it might have been—a rip close to the top of the jib, long splintery scrapes in the blue paintwork on the port side—but it kindled a black spark of anger in Lucas's heart. At the cruiser's criminal indifference; at his failure to evade trouble.

"Unhook the halyard and let it down," he told Damian. "We'll have to do without the jib."

"*Abode Two*. That's the name of the bugger nearly ran us down. Registered in Norwich. We should find him and get him to pay for this mess," Damian said, as he folded the torn jib sail.

"I wonder why he was going so damned fast."

"Maybe he went to take a look at the dragon, and something scared him off."

"Or maybe he just wanted to get out of the fret." Lucas looked all around, judging angles and clearances. The trees stood close together in water scummed with every kind of debris, stark and white above the tide line, black and clad with mussels and barnacles below. He said, "Let's try pushing backward. But be careful. I don't want any more scrapes."

By the time they had freed themselves from the dead trees the fret had advanced around them. A cold streaming whiteness that moved just above the water, deepening in every direction.

"Now we're caught up in it, it's as easy to go forward as to go back. So we might as well press on," Lucas said.

"That's the spirit. Just don't hit any more trees."

"I'll do my best."

"Think we should put up the sail?"

"There's hardly any wind, and the tide's still going out. We'll just go with the current."

"Dragon weather," Damian said.

"Listen," Lucas said.

After a moment's silence, Damian said, "Is it another boat?"

"Thought I heard wings."

Lucas had taken out his catapult. He fitted a ball bearing in the center of its fat rubber band as he looked all around. There was a splash among the dead trees to starboard and he brought up the catapult and pulled back the rubber band as something dropped onto a dead branch. A heron, gray as a ghost, turning its head to look at him.

Lucas lowered the catapult, and Damian whispered, "You could take that easy."

"I was hoping for a duck or two."

"Let me try a shot."

Lucas stuck the catapult in his belt. "You kill it, you eat it."

The heron straightened its crooked neck and rose up and opened its wings and with a lazy flap launched itself across the water, sailing past the stern of the boat and vanishing into the mist.

"Ritchy cooked one once," Damian said. "With about a ton of aniseed. Said it was how the Romans did them."

"How was it?"

"Pretty fucking awful, you want to know the truth."

"Pass me one of the oars," Lucas said. "We can row a while."

They rowed through mist into mist. The small noises they made seemed magnified, intimate. Now and again Lucas put his hand over the side and dipped up a palmful of water and tasted it. Telling Damian that fresh water was slow to mix with salt, so as long as it stayed sweet it meant they were in the old river channel and shouldn't run into anything. Damian was skeptical, but shrugged when Lucas challenged him to come up with a better way of finding their way through the fret without stranding themselves on some mud bank.

They'd been rowing for ten minutes or so when a long, low mournful note boomed out far ahead of them. It shivered Lucas to the marrow of his bones. He and Damian stopped rowing and looked at each other.

"I'd say that was a foghorn, if I didn't know what one sounded like," Damian said.

"Maybe it's a boat. A big one."

"Or maybe you-know-what. Calling for its dragon-mummy."

"Or warning people away."

"I think it came from over there," Damian said, pointing off to starboard.

"I think so too. But it's hard to be sure of anything in this stuff."

They rowed aslant the current. A dim and low palisade appeared, resolving into a bed of sea grass that spread along the edge of the old river channel. Lucas, believing that he knew where they were, felt a clear measure of relief. They sculled into a narrow cut that led through the grass. Tall stems bent and showered them with drops of condensed mist as they brushed past. Then they were out into open water on the far side. A beach loomed out of the mist and sand suddenly gripped and grated along the length of the little boat's keel. Damian dropped his oar and vaulted over the side and

splashed away, running up the beach and vanishing into granular whiteness. Lucas shipped his own oar and slid into knee-deep water and hauled the boat through purling ripples, then lifted from the bow the bucket filled with concrete he used as an anchor and dropped it onto hard wet sand, where it keeled sideways in a dint that immediately filled with water.

He followed Damian's footprints up the beach, climbed a low ridge grown over with marram grass, and descended to the other side of the sand bar. Boats lay at anchor in shallow water, their outlines blurred by mist. Two dayfishers with small wheelhouses at their bows. Several sailboats not much bigger than his. A cabin cruiser with trim white superstructure, much like the one that had almost run him down.

A figure materialized out of the whiteness, a chubby boy of five or six in dungsrees who ran right around Lucas, laughing, and chased away. He followed the boy toward a blurred eye of light far down the beach. Raised voices. Laughter. A metallic screeching. As he drew close, the blurred light condensed and separated into two sources: a bonfire burning above the tide line; a rack of spotlights mounted on a police speedboat anchored a dozen meters off the beach, long fingers of light lancing through mist and blurrily illuminating the long sleek shape stranded at the edge of the water.

It was big, the sea dragon, easily fifteen meters from stem to stern and about three meters across at its waist, tapering to blunt and shovel-shaped points at either end, coated in close-fitting and darkly tinted scales. An alien machine, solid and obdurate. One of thousands spawned by sealed mother ships the UN had purchased from the !Cha.

Lucas thought that it looked like a leech, or one of the parasitic flukes that lived in the bellies of sticklebacks. A big segmented shape, vaguely streamlined, helplessly prostrate. People stood here and there on the curve of its back. A couple of kids were whacking away at its flank with chunks of driftwood. A group of men and women stood at its nose, heads bowed as if in prayer. A woman was walking along its length, pointing a wand-like instrument at different places. A cluster of people were conferring among a scatter of toolboxes and a portable generator, and one of them stepped forward and applied an angle grinder to the dragon's hide. There was a ragged screech and a fan of orange sparks sprayed out and the man stepped back and turned to his companions and shook his head. Beyond the dragon, dozens more people could be glimpsed through the blur of the fret: everyone from the little town of Martham must have walked out along the sand bar to see the marvel that had cast itself up at their doorstep.

According to the UN, dragons cruised the oceans and swept up and digested the vast rafts of floating garbage that were part of the legacy of the wasteful oil-dependent world before the Spasm. According to rumors propagated on the stealth nets, a UN black lab had long ago cracked open a dragon and reverse-engineered its technology for fell purposes, or they were a cover for an alien plot to infiltrate Earth and construct secret bases in the ocean deeps, or to geoengineer the world in some radical and inimical fashion. And so on, and so on. One of his mother's ongoing disputes was with the Midway Island utopians, who were using modified dragons to sweep plastic particulates from the North Pacific Gyre and spin the polymer soup into construction materials: true utopians shouldn't use any kind of alien technology, according to her.

Lucas remembered his mother's request to take photos of the dragon and fished out her phone; when he switched it on, it emitted a lone and plaintive beep and its screen flashed and went dark. He switched it off, switched it on again. This time it did nothing. So it was true: the dragon was somehow suppressing electronic equip-

ment. Lucas felt a shiver of apprehension, wondering what else it could do, wondering if it was watching him and everyone around it.

As he pushed the dead phone into his pocket, someone called his name. Lucas turned, saw an old man dressed in a yellow slicker and a peaked corduroy cap bustling toward him. Bill Danvers, one of the people who tended the oyster beds east of Martham, asking him now if he'd come over with Grant Higgins.

"I came in my own boat," Lucas said.

"You worked for Grant though," Bill Danvers said, and held out a flat quarter-liter bottle.

"Once upon a time. That's kind, but I'll pass."

"Vodka and ginger root. It'll keep out the cold." The old man unscrewed the cap and took a sip and held out the bottle again.

Lucas shook his head.

Bill Danvers took another sip and capped the bottle, saying, "You came over from Halvergate?"

"A little south of Halvergate. Sailed all the way." It felt good to say it.

"People been coming in from every place, past couple of hours. Including those science boys you see trying to break into her. But I was here first. Followed the damn thing in after it went past me. I was fishing for pollack, and it went past like an island on the move. Like to have had me in the water, I was rocking so much. I fired up the outboard and swung around but I couldn't keep pace with it. I saw it hit the bar, though. It didn't slow down a bit, must have been traveling at twenty knots. I heard it," Bill Danvers said, and clapped his hands. "Bang! It ran straight up, just like you see. When I caught up with it, it was wriggling like an eel. Trying to move forward, you know? And it did, for a little bit. And then it stuck, right where it is now. Must be something wrong with it, I reckon, or it wouldn't have grounded itself. Maybe it's dying, eh?"

"Can they die, dragons?"

"You live long enough, boy, you'll know everything has its time. Even unnatural things like this. Those science people, they've been trying to cut into it all morning. They used a thermal lance, and some kind of fancy drill. Didn't even scratch it. Now they're trying this saw thing with a blade tougher than diamond. Or so they say. Whatever it is, it won't do any good. Nothing on Earth can touch a dragon. Why'd you come all this way?"

"Just to take a look."

"Long as that's all you do I won't have any quarrel with you. You might want to pay the fee now."

"Fee?"

"Five pounds. Or five euros, if that's what you use."

"I don't have any money," Lucas said.

Bill Danvers studied him. "I was here first. Anyone says different they're a god-damned liar. I'm the only one can legitimately claim salvage rights. The man what found the dragon," he said, and turned and walked toward two women, starting to talk long before he reached them.

Lucas went on down the beach. A man sat cross-legged on the sand, sketching on a paper pad with a stick of charcoal. A small group of women were chanting some kind of incantation and brushing the dragon's flank with handfuls of ivy, and all down its length people stood close, touching its scales with the palms of their hands or leaning against it, peering into it, like penitents at a holy relic. Its scales were easily a meter across and each was a slightly different shape, six- or seven-sided, dark yet grainily translucent. Clumps of barnacles and knots of hair-like weed clung here and there.

Lucas took a step into cold, ankle-deep water, and another. Reached out, the tips of his fingers tingling, and brushed the surface of one of the plates. It was the same temperature as the air and covered in small dimples, like hammered metal. He pressed the palm of his hand flat against it and felt a steady vibration, like touching the throat of a purring cat. A shiver shot through the marrow of him, a delicious mix of fear and exhilaration. Suppose his mother and her friends were right? Suppose there was an alien inside there? A Jackaroo or a !Cha riding inside the dragon because it was the only way, thanks to the agreement with the UN, they could visit the Earth. An actual alien lodged in the heart of the machine, watching everything going on around it, trapped and helpless, unable to call for help because it wasn't supposed to be there.

No one knew what any of the aliens looked like—whether they looked more or less like people, or were unimaginable monsters, or clouds of gas, or swift cool thoughts schooling inside some vast computer. They had shown themselves only as avatars, plastic man-shaped shells with the pleasant, bland but somehow creepy faces of old-fashioned shop dummies, and after the treaty had been negotiated only a few of those were left on Earth, at the UN headquarters in Geneva. Suppose, Lucas thought, the scientists broke in and pulled its passenger out. He imagined some kind of squid, saucer eyes and a clacking beak in a knot of thrashing tentacles, helpless in Earth's gravity. Or suppose something came to rescue it? Not the UN, but an actual alien ship. His heart beat fast and strong at the thought.

Walking a wide circle around the blunt, eyeless prow of the dragon, he found Damian on the other side, talking to a slender, dark-haired girl dressed in a shorts and a heavy sweater. She turned to look at Lucas as he walked up, and said to Damian, "Is this your friend?"

"Lisbet was just telling me about the helicopter that crashed," Damian said. "Its engine cut out when it got too close and it dropped straight into the sea. Her father helped to rescue the pilot."

"She broke her hip," the girl, Lisbet, said. "She's at our house now. I'm supposed to be looking after her, but Doctor Naja gave her something that put her to sleep."

"Lisbet's father is the mayor," Damian said. "He's in charge of all this."

"He thinks he is," the girl said, "but no one is really. Police and everyone arguing among themselves. Do you have a phone, Lucas? Mine doesn't work. This is the best thing to ever happen here and I can't even tell my friends about it."

"I could row you out to where your phone started working," Damian said.

"I don't think so," Lisbet said, with a coy little smile, twisting the toes of her bare right foot in the wet sand.

Lucas had thought that she was around his and Damian's age; now he realized that she was at least two years younger.

"It'll be absolutely safe," Damian said. "Word of honor."

Lisbet shook her head. "I want to stick around here and see what happens next."

"That's a good idea too," Damian said. "We can sit up by the fire and keep warm. I can tell you all about our adventures. How we found our way through the mist. How we were nearly run down—"

"I have to go and find my friends," Lisbet said, and flashed a dazzling smile at Lucas and said that it was nice to meet him and turned away. Damian caught at her arm and Lucas stepped in and told him to let her go, and Lisbet smiled at Lucas again and walked off, bare feet leaving dainty prints in the wet sand.

"Thanks for that," Damian said.

"She's a kid. And she's also the mayor's daughter."

"So? We were just talking."

"So he could have you locked up if he wanted to. Me too."

"You don't have to worry about that, do you? Because you scared her off," Damian said.

"She walked away because she wanted to," Lucas said.

He would have said more, would have asked Damian why they were arguing, but at that moment the dragon emitted its mournful wail. A great honking blare, more or less B-Flat, so loud it was like a physical force, shocking every square centimeter of Lucas's body. He clapped his hands over his ears, but the sound was right inside the box of his skull, shivering deep in his chest and his bones. Damian had pressed his hands over his ears, too, and all along the dragon's length people stepped back or ducked away. Then the noise abruptly cut off, and everyone stepped forward again. The women flailed even harder, their chant sounding muffled to Lucas; the dragon's call had been so loud it had left a buzz in his ears, and he had to lean close to hear Damian say, "Isn't this something?"

"It's definitely a dragon," Lucas said, his voice sounding flat and mostly inside his head. "Are we done arguing?"

"I didn't realize we were," Damian said. "Did you see those guys trying to cut it open?"

"Around the other side? I was surprised the police are letting them do whatever it is they're doing."

"Lisbet said they're scientists from the marine labs at Swatham. They work for the government, just like the police. She said they think this is a plastic eater. It sucks up plastic and digests it, turns it into carbon dioxide and water."

"That's what the UN wants people to think it does, anyhow."

"Sometimes you sound just like your mother."

"There you go again."

Damian put his hand on Lucas's shoulder. "I'm just ragging on you. Come on, why don't we go over by the fire and get warm?"

"If you want to talk to that girl again, just say so."

"Now who's spoiling for an argument? I thought we could get warm, find something to eat. People are selling stuff."

"I want to take a good close look at the dragon. That's why we came here, isn't it?"

"You do that, and I'll be right back."

"You get into trouble, you can find your own way home," Lucas said, but Damian was already walking away, fading into the mist without once looking back.

Lucas watched him fade away, expecting him to turn around. He didn't.

Irritated by the silly spat, Lucas drifted back around the dragon's prow, watched the scientists attack with a jackhammer the joint between two large scales. They were putting everything they had into it, but didn't seem to be getting anywhere. A gang of farmers from a collective arrived on two tractors that left neat tracks on the wet sand and put out the smell of frying oil, which reminded Lucas that he hadn't eaten since breakfast. He was damned cold, too. He trudged up the sand and bought a cup of fish soup from a woman who poured it straight from the iron pot she hooked out of the edge of the big bonfire, handing him a crust of bread to go with it. Lucas sipped the scalding stuff and felt his blood warm, soaked up the last of the soup with the crust and dredged the plastic cup in the sand to clean it and handed it back to the woman. Plenty of people were standing around the fire, but there was no sign of Damian. Maybe he was chasing that girl. Maybe he'd been arrested. Most likely, he'd turn up with that stupid smile of his, shrugging off their argument, claiming he'd only been joking. The way he did.

The skirts of the fret drifted apart and revealed the dim shapes of Martham's buildings at the far end of the sand bar; then the fret closed up and the little town vanished. The dragon sounded its distress or alarm call again. In the ringing silence

afterward a man said to no one in particular, with the satisfaction of someone who has discovered the solution to one of the universe's perennial mysteries, "Twenty-eight minutes on the dot."

At last, there was the sound of an engine and a shadowy shape gained definition in the fret that hung offshore: a boxy, old-fashioned landing craft that drove past the police boat and beached in the shallows close to the dragon. Its bow door splashed down and soldiers trotted out and the police and several civilians and scientists went down the beach to meet them. After a brief discussion, one of the soldiers stepped forward and raised a bullhorn to his mouth and announced that for the sake of public safety a two-hundred-meter exclusion zone was going to be established.

Several soldiers began to unload plastic crates. The rest chivvied the people around the dragon, ordering them to move back, driving them up the beach past the bonfire. Lucas spotted the old man, Bill Danvers, arguing with two soldiers. One suddenly grabbed the old man's arm and spun him around and twisted something around his wrists; the other looked at Lucas as he came toward them, telling him to stay back or he'd be arrested too.

"He's my uncle," Lucas said. "If you let him go I'll make sure he doesn't cause any more trouble."

"Your uncle?" The soldier wasn't much older than Lucas, with cropped ginger hair and a ruddy complexion.

"Yes, sir. He doesn't mean any harm. He's just upset, because no one cares that he was the first to find it."

"Like I said," the old man said.

The two soldiers looked at each other, and the ginger-haired one told Lucas, "You're responsible for him. If he starts up again, you'll both be sorry."

"I'll look after him."

The soldier stared at Lucas for a moment, then flourished a small-bladed knife and cut the plasticuffs that bound the old man's wrists and shoved him toward Lucas. "Stay out of our way, grandpa. All right?"

"Sons of bitches," Bill Danvers said, as the soldiers walked off. He raised his voice and called out, "I found it first. Someone owes me for that."

"I think everyone knows you saw it come ashore," Lucas said. "But they're in charge now."

"They're going to blow it open," a man said.

He held a satchel in one hand and a folded chair in the other; when he shook the chair open and sat down Lucas recognized him: the man who'd been sitting at the head of the dragon, sketching it.

"They can't," Bill Danvers said.

"They're going to try," the man said.

Lucas looked back at the dragon. Its streamlined shape dim in the streaming fret, the activity around its head (if that was its head) a vague shifting of shadows. Soldiers and scientists conferring in a tight knot. Then the police boat and the landing craft started their motors and reversed through the wash of the incoming tide, fading into the fret, and the scientists followed the soldiers up the beach, walking past the bonfire, and there was a stir and rustle among the people strung out along the ridge.

"No damn right," Bill Danvers said.

The soldier with the bullhorn announced that there would be a small controlled explosion. A moment later, the dragon blared out its loud, long call and in the shocking silence afterward laughter broke out among the crowd on the ridge. The soldier with the bullhorn began to count backward from ten. Some of the crowd took up the chant. There was a brief silence at zero, and then a red light flared at the base of the

dragon's midpoint and a flat crack rolled out across the ridge and was swallowed by the mist. People whistled and clapped, and Bill Danvers stepped around Lucas and ran down the slope toward the dragon. Falling to his knees and getting up and running on as soldiers chased after him, closing in from either side.

People cheered and hooted, and some ran after Bill Danvers, young men mostly, leaping down the slope and swarming across the beach. Lucas saw Damian among the runners and chased after him, heart pounding, flooded with a heedless exhilaration. Soldiers blocked random individuals, catching hold of them or knocking them down as others dodged past. Lucas heard the clatter of the bullhorn but couldn't make out any words, and then there was a terrific flare of white light and a hot wind struck him so hard he lost his balance and fell to his knees.

The dragon had split in half and things were glowing with hot light inside and the waves breaking around its rear hissed and exploded into steam. A terrific heat scorched Lucas's face. He pushed to his feet. All around, people were picking themselves up and soldiers were moving among them, shoving them away from the dragon. Some complied; others stood, squinting into the light that beat out of the broken dragon, blindingly bright waves and wings of white light flapping across the beach, burning away the mist.

Blinking back tears and blocky afterimages, Lucas saw two soldiers dragging Bill Danvers away from the dragon. The old man hung limp and helpless in their grasp, splayed feet furrowing the sand. His head was bloody, something sticking out of it at an angle.

Lucas started toward them, and there was another flare that left him stunned and half-blind. Things fell all around and a translucent shard suddenly jutted up by his foot. The two soldiers had dropped Bill Danvers. Lucas stepped toward him, picking his way through a field of debris, and saw that he was beyond help. His head had been knocked out of shape by the shard that stuck in his temple, and blood was soaking into the sand around it.

The dragon had completely broken apart now. Incandescent stuff dripped and hissed into steaming water and the burning light was growing brighter.

Like almost everyone else, Lucas turned and ran. Heat clawed at his back as he slogged to the top of the ridge. He saw Damian sitting on the sand, right hand clamped on the upper part of his left arm, and he jogged over and helped his friend up. Leaning against each other, they stumbled across the ridge. Small fires crackled here and there, where hot debris had kindled clumps of marram grass. Everything was drenched in a pulsing diamond brilliance. They went down the slope of the far side, angling toward the little blue boat, splashing into the water that had risen around it. Damian clambered unhandily over thwart and Lucas hauled up the concrete-filled bucket and boosted it over the side, then put his shoulder to the boat's prow and shoved it into the low breakers and tumbled in.

The boat drifted sideways on the rising tide as Lucas hauled up the sail. Dragon-light beat beyond the crest of the sand bar, brighter than the sun. Lucas heeled his little boat into the wind, ploughing through stands of sea grass into the channel beyond, chasing after the small fleet fleeing the scene. Damian sat in the bottom of the boat, hunched into himself, his back against the stem of the mast. Lucas asked him if he was okay; he opened his fingers to show a translucent spike embedded in the meat of his biceps. It was about the size of his little finger.

"Dumb bad luck," he said, his voice tight and wincing.

"I'll fix you up," Lucas said, but Damian shook his head.

"Just keep going. I think—"

Everything went white for a moment. Lucas ducked down and wrapped his arms around his head and for a moment saw shadowy bones through red curtains of flesh.

When he dared look around, he saw a narrow column of pure white light rising straight up, seeming to lean over as it climbed into the sky, aimed at the very apex of heaven.

A hot wind struck the boat and filled the sail, and Lucas sat up and grabbed the tiller and the sheet as the boat crabbed sideways. By the time he had it under control again the column of light had dimmed, fading inside drifting curtains of fret, rooted in a pale fire flickering beyond the sandbar.

Damian's father, Jason Playne, paid Lucas and his mother a visit the next morning. A burly man in his late forties with a shaven head and a blunt and forthright manner, dressed in work boots and denim overalls, he made the caravan seem small and frail. Standing over Julia's bed, telling her that he would like to ask Lucas about the scrape he and his Damian had gotten into.

"Ask away," Julia said. She was propped among her pillows, her gaze bright and amused. Her tablet lay beside her, images and blocks of text glimmering above it.

Jason Playne looked at her from beneath the thick hedge of his eyebrows. A strong odor of saltwater and sweated booze clung to him. He said, "I was hoping for a private word."

"My son and I have no secrets."

"This is about my son," Jason Playne said.

"They didn't do anything wrong, if that's what you're worried about," Julia said.

Lucas felt a knot of embarrassment and anger in his chest. He said, "I'm right here."

"Well, you didn't," his mother said.

Jason Playne looked at Lucas. "How did Damian get hurt?"

"He fell and cut himself," Lucas said, as steadily as he could. That was what he and Damian had agreed to say, as they'd sailed back home with their prize. Lucas had pulled the shard of dragon stuff from Damian's arm and staunched the bleeding with a bandage made from a strip ripped from the hem of Damian's shirt. There hadn't been much blood; the hot sliver had more or less cauterized the wound.

Jason Playne said, "He fell."

"Yes, sir."

"Are you sure? Because I reckon that cut in my son's arm was done by a knife. I reckon he got himself in some kind of fight."

Julia said, "That sounds more like an accusation than a question."

Lucas said, "We didn't get into a fight with anyone."

Jason Playne said, "Are you certain that Damian didn't steal something?"

"Yes, sir."

Which was the truth, as far as it went.

"Because if he did steal something, if he still has it, he's in a lot of trouble. You too."

"I like to think my son knows a little more about alien stuff than most," Julia said.

"I don't mean fairy stories," Jason Playne said. "I'm talking about the army ordering people to give back anything to do with that dragon thing. You stole something and you don't give it back and they find out? They'll arrest you. And if you try to sell it? Well, I can tell you for a fact that the people in that trade are mad and bad. I should know. I've met one or two of them in my time."

"I'm sure Lucas will take that to heart," Julia said.

And that was that, except after Jason Playne had gone she told Lucas that he'd been right about one thing: the people who tried to reverse-engineer alien technology were dangerous and should at all costs be avoided. "If I happened to come into possession of anything like that," she said, "I would get rid of it at once. Before anyone found out."

But Lucas couldn't get rid of the shard because he'd promised Damian that he'd

keep it safe until they could figure out what to do with it. He spent the next two days in a haze of guilt and indecision, struggling with the temptation to check that the thing was safe in its hiding place, wondering what Damian's father knew, wondering what his mother knew, wondering if he should sail out to a deep part of the Flood and throw it into the water, until at last Damian came over to the island.

It was early in the evening, just after sunset. Lucas was watering the vegetable garden when Damian called to him from the shadows inside a clump of buddleia bushes. Smiling at Lucas, saying, "If you think I look bad, you should see him."

"I can't think he could look much worse."

"I got in a few licks," Damian said. His upper lip was split and both his eyes were blackened and there was a discolored knot on the hinge of his jaw.

"He came here," Lucas said. "Gave me and Julia a hard time."

"How much does she know?"

"I told her what happened."

"Everything?"

There was an edge in Damian's voice.

"Except about how you were hit with the shard," Lucas said.

"Oh. Your mother's cool, you know? I wish . . ."

When it was clear that his friend wasn't going to finish his thought, Lucas said, "Is it okay? You coming here so soon."

"Oh, Dad's over at Halvergate on what he calls business. Don't worry about him. Did you keep it safe?"

"I said I would."

"Why I'm here, L, I think I might have a line on someone who wants to buy our little treasure."

"Your father said we should keep away from people like that."

"He would."

"Julia thinks so too."

"If you don't want anything to do with it, just say so. Tell me where it is, and I'll take care of everything."

"Right."

"So is it here, or do we have to go somewhere?"

"I'll show you," Lucas said, and led his friend through the buddleias and along the low ridge to the northern end of the tiny island where an apple tree stood, hunched and gnarled and mostly dead, crippled by years of salt spray and saltwater seep. Lucas knelt and pulled up a hinge of turf and took out a small bundle of oilcloth. As he unwrapped it, Damian dropped to his knees beside him and reached out and touched an edge of the shard.

"Is it dead?"

"It wasn't ever alive," Lucas said.

"You know what I mean. What did you do to it?"

"Nothing. It just turned itself off."

When Lucas had pulled the shard from Damian's arm, its translucence had been veined with a network of shimmering threads. Now it was a dull reddish black, like an old scab.

"Maybe it uses sunlight, like phones," Damian said.

"I thought of that, but I also thought it would be best to keep it hidden."

"It still has to be worth something," Damian said, and began to fold the oilcloth around the shard.

Lucas was gripped by a sudden apprehension, as if he was falling while kneeling there in the dark. He said, "We don't have to do this right now."

"Yes we do. I do."

"Your father—he isn't in Halvergate, is he?"

Damian looked straight at Lucas. "I didn't kill him, if that's what you're worried about. He tried to knock me down when I went to leave, but I knocked him down instead. Pounded on him good. Put him down and put him out. Tied him up too, to give me some time to get away."

"He'll come after you."

"Remember when we were kids? We used to lie up here, in summer. We'd look up at the stars and talk about what it would be like to go to one of the worlds the Jackaroo gave us. Well, I plan to find out. The UN lets you buy tickets off lottery winners who don't want to go. It's legal and everything. All you need is money. I reckon this will give us a good start."

"You know I can't come with you."

"If you want your share, you'll have to come to Norwich. Because there's no way I'm coming back here," Damian said, and stood with a smooth, swift motion.

Lucas stood too. They were standing toe to toe under the apple tree, the island and the Flood around it quiet and dark. As if they were the last people on Earth.

"Don't try to stop me," Damian said. "My father tried, and I fucked him up good and proper."

"Let's talk about this."

"There's nothing to talk about," Damian said. "It is what it is."

He tried to step past Lucas, and Lucas grabbed at his arm and Damian swung him around and lifted him off his feet and ran him against the trunk of the tree. Lucas tried to wrench free but Damian bore down with unexpected strength, pressing him against rough bark, leaning into him. Pinpricks of light in the dark wells of his eyes. His voice soft and hoarse in Lucas's ear, his breath hot against Lucas's cheek.

"You always used to be able to beat me, L. At running, swimming, you name it. Not any more. I've changed. Want to know why?"

"We don't have to fight about this."

"No, we don't," Damian said, and let Lucas go and stepped back.

Lucas pushed away from the tree, a little unsteady on his feet. "What's got into you?"

Damian laughed. "That's good, that is. Can't you guess?"

"You need the money because you're running away. All right, you can have my share, if that's what you want. But it won't get you very far."

"Not by itself. But like I said, I've changed. Look," Damian said, and yanked up the sleeve of his shirt, showing the place on his upper arm where the shard had punched into him.

There was only a trace of a scar, pink and smooth. Damian pulled the skin taut, and Lucas saw the outline of a kind of ridged or fibrous sheath underneath.

"It grew," Damian said.

"Jesus."

"I'm stronger. And faster, too. I feel, I don't know. Better than I ever have. Like I could run all the way around the world without stopping, if I had to."

"What if it doesn't stop growing? You should see a doctor, D. Seriously."

"I'm going to. The kind that can make money for me, from what happened. You still think that little bit of dragon isn't worth anything? It changed me. It could change anyone. I really don't want to fight," Damian said, "but I will if you get in my way. Because there's no way I'm stopping here. If I do, my dad will come after me. And if he does, I'll have to kill him. *And I know I can.*"

The two friends stared at each other in the failing light. Lucas was the first to look away.

"You can come with me," Damian said. "To Norwich. Then wherever we want to go. To infinity and beyond. Think about it. You still got my phone?"

"Do you want it back? It's in the caravan."

"Keep it. I'll call you. Tell you where to meet up. Come or don't come, it's up to you."

And then he ran, crashing through the buddleia bushes that grew along the slope of the ridge. Lucas went after him, but by the time he reached the edge of the water, Damian had started the motor of the boat he'd stolen from his father's shrimp farm, and was dwindling away into the thickening twilight.

The next day, Lucas was out on the Flood, checking baited cages he'd set for eels, when an inflatable pulled away from the shrimp farm and drew a curving line of white across the water, hooking toward him. Jason Playne sat in the inflatable's stern, cutting the motor and drifting neatly alongside Lucas's boat and catching hold of the thwart. His left wrist was bandaged and he wore a baseball cap pulled low over sunglasses that darkly reflected Lucas and Lucas's boat and the waterscape all around. He asked without greeting or preamble where Damian was, and Lucas said that he didn't know.

"You saw him last night. Don't lie. What did he tell you?"

"That he was going away. That he wanted me to go with him."

"But you didn't."

"Well, no. I'm still here."

"Don't try to be clever, boy." Jason Playne stared at Lucas for a long moment, then sighed and took off his baseball cap and ran the palm of his hand over his shaven head. "I talked to your mother. I know he isn't with you. But he could be somewhere close by. In the woods, maybe. Camping out like you two used to do when you were smaller."

"All I know is that he's gone, Mr. Payne. Far away from here."

Jason Playne's smile didn't quite work. "You're his friend, Lucas. I know you want to do the right thing by him. As friends should. So maybe you can tell him, if you see him, that I'm not angry. That he should come home and it won't be a problem. You could also tell him to be careful. And you should be careful, too. I think you know what I mean. It could get you both into a lot of trouble if you talk to the wrong people. Or even if you talk to the right people. You think about that," Jason Playne said, and pushed away from Lucas's boat and opened the throttle of his inflatable's motor and zoomed away, bouncing over the slight swell, dwindling into the glare of the sun off the water.

Lucas went back to hauling up the cages, telling himself that he was glad that Damian was gone, that he'd escaped. When he'd finished, he took up the oars and began to row toward the island, back to his mother, and the little circle of his life.

Damian didn't call that day, or the next, or the day after that. Lucas was angry at first, then heartsick, convinced that Damian was in trouble. That he'd squandered or lost the money he'd made from selling the shard, or that he'd been cheated, or worse. After a week, Lucas sailed to Norwich and spent half a day tramping around the city in a futile attempt to find his friend. Jason Playne didn't trouble him again, but several times Lucas spotted him standing at the end of the shrimp farm's chain of tanks, studying the island.

September's Indian summer broke in a squall of storms. It rained every day. Hard, cold rain blowing in swaying curtains across the face of the waters. Endless racks of low clouds driving eastward. Atlantic weather. The Flood was muddier and less salty than usual. The eel traps stayed empty and storm surges drove the mackerel shoals and other fish into deep water. Lucas harvested everything he could from the veg-

etable garden, and from the ancient pear tree and wild, forgotten hedgerows in the ribbon of woods behind the levee, counted and recounted the store of cans and MREs. He set rabbit snares in the woods, and spent hours tracking squirrels from tree to tree, waiting for a moment when he could take a shot with his catapult. He caught sticklebacks in the weedy tide pools that fringed the broken brickwork shore of the island and used them to bait trotlines for crabs, and if he failed to catch any squirrels or crabs he collected mussels from the car reef at the foot of the levee.

It rained through the rest of September and on into October. Julia developed a racking and persistent cough. She enabled the long-disused keyboard function of her tablet and typed her essays, opinion pieces and journal entries instead of giving them straight to camera. She was helping settlers on the Antarctic Peninsula to petition the International Court in Johannesburg to grant them statehood, so that they could prevent exploitation of oil and mineral reserves by multinationals. She was arguing with the Midway Island utopians about whether or not the sea dragons they were using to harvest plastic particulates were also sucking up precious phytoplankton, and destabilizing the oceanic ecosystem. And so on, and so forth.

The witchwoman visited and treated her with infusions and poultices, but the cough grew worse and because they had no money for medicine, Lucas tried to find work at the algae farm at Halvergate. Every morning, he set out before dawn and stood at the gates in a crowd of men and women as one of the supervisors pointed to this or that person and told them to step forward, told the rest to come back and try their luck tomorrow. After his fifth unsuccessful cattle call, Lucas was walking along the shoulder of the road toward town and the jetty where his boat was tied up when a battered van pulled up beside him and the driver called to him. It was Ritchy, the stoop-shouldered one-eyed foreman of the shrimp farm. Saying, "Need a lift, lad?"

"You can tell him there's no point in following me because I don't have any idea where Damian is," Lucas said, and kept walking.

"He doesn't know I'm here." Ritchy leaned at the window, edging the van along, matching Lucas's pace. Its tires left wakes in the flooded road. Rain danced on its roof. "I got some news about Damian. Hop in. I know a place does a good breakfast, and you look like you could use some food."

They drove past patchworks of shallow lagoons behind mesh fences, past the steel tanks and piping of the cracking plant that turned algal lipids into biofuel. Ritchy talked about the goddamned weather, asked Lucas how his boat was handling, asked after his mother, said he was sorry to hear that she was ill and maybe he should pay a visit, he always liked talking to her because she made you look at things in a different way, a stream of inconsequential chatter he kept up all the way to the café.

It was in one corner of a layby where two lines of trucks were parked nose to tail. A pair of shipping containers welded together and painted bright pink. Red and white-checkered curtains behind windows cut in the ribbed walls. Formica tables and plastic chairs crowded inside, all occupied and a line of people waiting, but Ritchy knew the Portuguese family who ran the place and he and Lucas were given a small table in the back, between a fridge and the service counter, and without asking were served mugs of strong tea, and shrimp and green pepper omelets with baked beans and chips.

"You know what I miss most?" Ritchy said. "Pigs. Bacon and sausage. Ham. They say the Germans are trying to clone flu-resistant pigs. If they are, I hope they get a move on. Eat up, lad. You'll feel better with something inside you."

"You said you had some news about Damian. Where is he? Is he all right?"

Ritchy squinted at Lucas. His left eye, the one that had been lost when he'd been a soldier, glimmered blankly. It had been grown from a sliver of tooth and didn't have much in the way of resolution, but allowed him to see both infrared and ultraviolet light.

He said, "Know what collateral damage is?"

Fear hollowed Lucas's stomach. "Damian is in trouble, isn't he? What happened?"

"Used to be, long ago, wars were fought on a battlefield chosen by both sides. Two armies meeting by appointment. Squaring up to each other. Slogging it out. Then wars became so big the countries fighting them became one huge battlefield. Civilians found themselves on the front line. Or rather, there was no front line. Total war, they called it. And then you got wars that weren't wars. Asymmetrical wars. Netwars. Where war gets mixed up with crime and terrorism. Your mother was on the edge of a netwar at one time. Against the Jackaroo and those others. Still thinks she's fighting it, although it long ago evolved into something else. There aren't any armies or battlefields in a netwar. Just a series of nodes in distributed organization. Collateral damage," Ritchy said, forking omelet into his mouth, "is the inevitable consequence of taking out one of those nodes, because all of them are embedded inside ordinary society. It could be a flat in an apartment block in a city. Or a little island where someone thinks something useful is hidden."

"I don't—"

"You don't know anything," Ritchy said. "I believe you. Damian ran off with whatever it was you two found or stole, and left you in the lurch. But the people Damian got himself involved with don't know you don't know. That's why we've been looking out for you. Making sure you and your mother don't become collateral damage."

"Wait. What people? What did Damian do?"

"I'm trying to tell you, only it's harder than I thought it would be." Ritchy set his knife and fork together on his plate and said, "Maybe telling it straight is the best way. The day after Damian left, he tried to do some business with some people in Norwich. Bad people. The lad wanted to sell them a fragment of that dragon that stranded itself, but they decided to take it from him without paying. There was a scuffle and the lad got away and left a man with a bad knife wound. He died from it, a few weeks later. Those are the kind of people who look after their own, if you know what I mean. Anyone involved in that trade is bad news in one way or another. Jason had to pay them off, or else they would have come after him. An eye for an eye," Ritchy said, and tapped his blank eye with his little finger.

"What happened to Damian?"

"This is the hard part. After his trouble in Norwich, the lad called his father. He was drunk, ranting. Boasting how he was going to make all kinds of money. I managed to put a demon on his message, ran it back to a cell in Gravesend. Jason went up there, and that's when . . . Well, there's no other way of saying it. That's when he found out that Damian had been killed."

The shock was a jolt and a falling away. And then Lucas was back inside himself, hunched in his damp jeans and sweater in the clatter and bustle of the café, with the fridge humming next to him. Ritchy tore off the tops of four straws of sugar and poured them into Lucas's tea and stirred it and folded Lucas's hand around the mug and told him to drink.

Lucas sipped hot sweet tea and felt a little better.

"Always thought," Ritchy said, "that of the two of you, you were the best and brightest."

Lucas saw his friend in his mind's eye and felt cold and strange, knowing he'd never see him, never talk to him again.

Ritchy said, "The police got in touch yesterday. They found Damian's body in the river. They think he fell into the hands of one of the gangs that trade in offworld stuff."

Lucas suddenly understood something and said, "They wanted what was growing inside him. The people who killed him."

He told Ritchy about the shard that had hit Damian in the arm. How they'd pulled it out. How it had infected Damian.

"He had a kind of patch around the cut, under his skin. He said it was making him stronger."

Lucas saw his friend again, wild-eyed in the dusk, under the apple tree.

"That's what he thought. But that kind of thing, well, if he hadn't been murdered he would most likely have died from it."

"Do you know who did it?"

Ritchy shook his head. "The police are making what they like to call inquiries. They'll probably want to talk to you soon enough."

"Thank you. For telling me."

"I remember the world before the Jackaroo came," Ritchy said. "Them, and the others after them. It was in a bad way, but at least you knew where you were. If you happen to have any more of that stuff, lad, throw it in the Flood. And don't mark the spot."

Two detectives came to Gravesend to interview Lucas. He told them everything he knew. Julia said that he shouldn't blame himself, said that Damian had made a choice and it had been a bad choice. But Lucas carried the guilt around with him anyway. He should have done more to help Damian. He should have thrown the shard away. Or found him after they'd had the stupid argument over that girl. Or refused to take him out to see the damn dragon in the first place.

A week passed. Two. There was no funeral because the police would not release Damian's body. According to them, it was still undergoing forensic tests. Julia, who was tracking rumors about the murder and its investigation on the stealth nets, said it had probably been taken to some clandestine research lab, and she and Lucas had a falling out over it.

One day, returning home after checking the snares he'd set, Lucas climbed to the top of the levee and saw two men waiting beside his boat. Both were dressed in brand-new camo gear, one with a beard, the other with a shaven head and rings flashing in one ear. They started up the slope toward him, calling his name, and he turned tail and ran, cutting across a stretch of sour land gone to weeds and pioneer saplings, plunging into the stands of bracken at the edge of the woods, pausing, seeing the two men chasing toward him, turning and running on.

He knew every part of the woods, and quickly found a hiding place under the slanted trunk of a fallen sycamore grown over with moss and ferns, breathing quick and hard in the cold air. Rain pattered all around. Droplets of water spangled bare black twigs. The deep odor of wet wood and wet earth.

A magpie chattered, close by. Lucas set a ball bearing in the cup of his catapult and cut toward the sound, moving easily and quietly, freezing when he saw a twitch of movement between the wet tree trunks ahead. It was the bearded man, the camo circuit of his gear magicking him into a fairytale creature got up from wet bark and mud. He was talking into a phone headset in a language full of harsh vowels. Turning as Lucas stepped toward him, his smile white inside his beard, saying that there was no need to run away, he only wanted to talk.

"What is that you have, kid?"

"A catapult. I'll use it if I have to."

"What do you use it for? Hunting rabbits? I'm no rabbit."

"Who are you?"

"Police. I have ID," the man said, and before Lucas could say anything his hand went into the pocket of his camo trousers and came out with a pistol.

Lucas had made his catapult himself, from a yoke of springy poplar and a length of vatgrown rubber with the composition and tensile strength of the hinge inside a mussel shell. As the man brought up the pistol Lucas pulled back the band of rubber and let the ball bearing fly. He did it quickly and without thought, firing from the hip, and the ball bearing went exactly where he meant it to go. It smacked into the knuckles of the man's hand with a hard pop and the man yelped and dropped the pistol, and then he sat down hard and clapped his good hand to his knee, because Lucas's second shot had struck the soft part under the cap.

Lucas stepped up and kicked the pistol away and stepped back, a third ball bearing cupped in the catapult. The man glared at him, wincing with pain, and said something in his harsh language.

"Who sent you?" Lucas said.

His heart was racing, but his thoughts were cool and clear.

"Tell me where it is," the man said, "and we leave you alone. Your mother too."

"My mother doesn't have anything to do with this."

Lucas was watching the man and listening to someone moving through the wet wood, coming closer.

"She is in it, nevertheless," the man said. He tried to push to his feet but his wounded knee gave way and he cried out and sat down again. He'd bitten his lip bloody and sweat beaded his forehead.

"Stay still, or the next one hits you between the eyes," Lucas said. He heard a quaver in his voice and knew from the way the man looked at him that he'd heard it too.

"Go now, and fetch the stuff. And don't tell me you don't know what I mean. Fetch it and bring it here. That's the only offer you get," the man said. "And the only time I make it."

A twig snapped softly and Lucas turned, ready to let the ball bearing fly, but it was Damian's father who stepped around a dark green holly bush, saying, "You can leave this one to me."

At once Lucas understood what had happened. Within his cool clear envelope he could see everything: how it all connected.

"You set me up," he said.

"I needed to draw them out," Jason Playne said. He was dressed in jeans and an old-fashioned woodland camo jacket, and he was cradling a cut-down double-barreled shotgun.

"You let them know where I was. You told them I had more of the dragon stuff."

The man sitting on the ground was looking at them. "This does not end here," he said.

"I have you, and I have your friend. And you're going to pay for what you did to my son," Jason Playne said, and put a whistle to his lips and blew, two short notes. Off in the dark rainy woods another whistle answered.

The man said, "Idiot small time businessman. You don't know us. What we can do. Hurt me and we hurt you back ten-fold."

Jason Playne ignored him, and told Lucas that he could go.

"Why did you let them chase me? You could have caught them while they were waiting by my boat. Did you want them to hurt me?"

"I knew you'd lead them a good old chase. And you did. So, all's well that ends well, eh?" Jason Playne said. "Think of it as payback. For what happened to Damian."

Lucas felt a bubble of anger swelling in his chest. "You can't forgive me for what I didn't do."

"It's what you didn't do that caused all the trouble."

"It wasn't me. It was you. It was you who made him run away. It wasn't just the beatings. It was the thought that if he stayed here he'd become just like you."

Jason Playne turned toward Lucas, his face congested. "Go. Right now."

The bearded man drew a knife from his boot and flicked it open and pushed up with his good leg, throwing himself toward Jason Playne, and Lucas stretched the band of his catapult and let fly. The ball bearing struck the bearded man in the temple with a hollow sound and the man fell flat on his face. His temple was dented and blood came out of his nose and mouth and he thrashed and trembled and subsided.

Rain pattered down all around, like faint applause.

Then Jason Playne stepped toward the man and kicked him in the chin with the point of his boot. The man rolled over on the wet leaves, arms flopping wide.

"I reckon you killed him," Jason Playne said.

"I didn't mean—"

"Lucky for you there are two of them. The other will tell me what I need to know. You go now, boy. Go!"

Lucas turned and ran.

He didn't tell his mother about it. He hoped that Jason Playne would find out who had killed Damian and tell the police and the killers would answer for what they had done, and that would be an end to it.

That wasn't what happened.

The next day, a motor launch came over to the island, carrying police armed with machine-guns and the detectives investigating Damian's death, who arrested Lucas for involvement in two suspicious deaths and conspiracy to kidnap or murder other persons unknown. It seemed that one of the men that Jason Playne had hired to help him get justice for the death of his son had been a police informant.

Lucas was held in remand in Norwich for three months. Julia was too ill to visit him, but they talked on the phone and she sent messages via Ritchy, who'd been arrested along with every other worker on the shrimp farm, but released on bail after the police were unable to prove that he had anything to do with Jason Playne's scheme.

It was Ritchy who told Lucas that his mother had cancer that had started in her throat and spread elsewhere, and that she had refused treatment. Lucas was taken to see her two weeks later, handcuffed to a prison warden. She was lying in a hospital bed, looking shrunken and horribly vulnerable. Her dreadlocks bundled in a blue scarf. Her hand so cold when he took it in his. The skin loose on frail bones.

She had refused to agree to monoclonal antibody treatment that would shrink the tumors and remove cancer cells from her bloodstream, and had also refused food and water. The doctors couldn't intervene because a clause in her living will gave her the right to choose death instead of treatment. She told Lucas this in a hoarse whisper. Her lips were cracked and her breath foul, but her gaze was strong and insistent.

"Do the right thing even when it's the hardest thing," she said.

She died four days later. Her ashes were scattered in the rose garden of the municipal crematorium. Lucas stood in the rain between two wardens as the curate recited the prayer for the dead. The curate asked him if he wanted to scatter the ashes and he threw them out across the wet grass and dripping rose bushes with a flick of his wrist. Like casting a line across the water.

\*\*\*

He was sentenced to five years for manslaughter, reduced to eighteen months for time served on remand and for good behavior. He was released early in September. He'd been given a ticket for the bus to Norwich, and a voucher good for a week's stay in a halfway house, but he set off in the opposite direction, on foot. Walking south and east across country. Following back roads. Skirting the edges of sugar beet fields and bamboo plantations. Ducking into ditches or hedgerows whenever he heard a vehicle approaching. Navigating by the moon and the stars.

Once, a fox loped across his path.

Once, he passed a depot lit up in the night, robots shunting between a loading dock and a road-train.

By dawn he was making his way through the woods along the edge of the levee. He kept taking steps that weren't there. Several times he sat on his haunches and rested for a minute before pushing up and going on. At last, he struck the gravel track that led to the shrimp farm, and twenty minutes later was knocking on the door of the office.

Ritchy gave Lucas breakfast and helped him pull his boat out of the shed where it had been stored, and set it in the water. Lucas and the old man had stayed in touch: it had been Ritchy who'd told him that Jason Playne had been stabbed to death in prison, most likely by someone paid by the people he'd tried to chase down. Jason Playne's brother had sold the shrimp farm to a local consortium, and Ritchy had been promoted to supervisor.

He told Lucas over breakfast that he had a job there, if he wanted it. Lucas said that he was grateful, he really was, but he didn't know if he wanted to stay on.

"I'm not asking you to make a decision right away," Ritchy said. "Think about it. Get your bearings, come to me whenever you're ready. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Are you going to stay over on the island?"

"Just how bad is it?"

"I couldn't keep all of them off. They'd come at night. One party had a shotgun."

"You did what you could. I appreciate it."

"I wish I could have done more. They made a mess, but it isn't anything you can't fix up, if you want to."

A heron flapped away across the sun-silvered water as Lucas rowed around the point of the island. The unexpected motion plucked at an old memory. As if he'd seen a ghost.

He grounded his boat next to the rotting carcass of his mother's old rowboat and walked up the steep path. Ritchy had patched the broken windows of the caravan and put a padlock on the door. Lucas had the key in his pocket, but he didn't want to go in there, not yet.

After Julia had been taken into hospital, treasure hunters had come from all around, chasing rumors that parts of the dragon had been buried on the island. Holes were dug everywhere in the weedy remains of the vegetable garden; the microwave mast at the summit of the ridge, Julia's link with the rest of the world, had been uprooted. Lucas set his back to it and walked north, counting his steps. Both of the decoy caches his mother had planted under brick cairns had been ransacked, but the emergency cache, buried much deeper, was undisturbed.

Lucas dug down to the plastic box, and looked all around before he opened it and sorted through the things inside, squatting frogwise with the hot sun on his back.

An assortment of passports and identity cards, each with a photograph of younger versions of his mother, made out to different names and nationalities. A slim tight roll of old high-denomination banknotes, yuan, naira, and US dollars,

more or less worthless thanks to inflation and revaluation. Blank credit cards and credit cards in various names, also worthless. Dozens of sleeved data needles. A pair of AR glasses.

Lucas studied one of the ID cards. When he brushed the picture of his mother with his thumb, she turned to present her profile, turned to look at him when he brushed the picture again.

He pocketed the ID card and the data needles and AR glasses, then walked along the ridge to the apple tree at the far end, and stared out across the flood that spread glistening like shot silk under the sun. Thoughts moved through his mind like a slow and stately parade of pictures that he could examine in every detail, and then there were no thoughts at all and for a little while no part of him was separate from the world all around, sun and water and the hot breeze that moved through the crooked branches of the tree.

Lucas came to himself with a shiver. Windfall apples lay everywhere among the weeds and nettles that grew around the trees, and dead wasps and hornets were scattered among them like yellow and black bullets. Here was a dead bird, too, gone to a tatter of feathers of white bone. And here was another, and another. As if some passing cloud of poison had struck everything down.

He picked an apple from the tree, mashed it against the trunk, and saw pale threads fine as hair running through the mash of pulp. He peeled bark from a branch, saw threads laced in the living wood.

Dragon stuff, growing from the seed he'd planted. Becoming something else.

In the wood of the tree and the apples scattered all around was a treasure men would kill for. Had killed for. He'd have more than enough to set him up for life, if he sold it to the right people. He could build a house right here, buy the shrimp farm or set up one of his own. He could buy a ticket on one of the shuttles that traveled through the wormhole anchored between the Earth and the Moon, travel to infinity and beyond . . .

Lucas remembered the hopeful shine in Damian's eyes when he'd talked about those new worlds. He thought of how the dragon-shard had killed or damaged everyone it had touched. He pictured his mother working at her tablet in her sick bed, advising and challenging people who were attempting to build something new right here on Earth. It wasn't much of a contest. It wasn't even close.

He walked back to the caravan. Took a breath, unlocked the padlock, stepped inside. Everything had been overturned or smashed. Cupboards gaped open, the mattress of his mother's bed was slashed and torn, a great ruin littered the floor. He rooted among the wreckage, found a box of matches and a plastic jug of lamp oil. He splashed half of the oil on the torn mattress, lit a twist of cardboard and lobbed it onto the bed, beat a retreat as flames sprang up.

It didn't take ten minutes to gather up dead wood and dry weeds and pile them around the apple tree, splash the rest of the oil over its trunk and set fire to the tinder. A thin pall of white smoke spread across the island, blowing out across the water as he raised the sail of his boat and turned it into the wind.

Heading south. O



**OATH OF FEALTY**

By Elizabeth Moon

Del Rey, \$25.00 (hc)

ISBN: 978-0-345-50874-4

**E**lizabeth Moon began her career with a hugely popular fantasy trilogy, "The Deed of Paksenarrion," about a young woman who becomes first a mercenary soldier, then a Paladin, with magical powers on top of fighting skills and a commitment to good. Here, after more than twenty years, during which she has been more active in SF than in fantasy, she returns to the world of that epic, taking up the careers of several secondary characters who now have their own responsibilities and challenges.

The central characters are all thrust into new roles as a consequence of the concluding events of the previous trilogy, which the author makes sufficiently clear that new readers don't need to have read—though it is well worth searching out. Kieri Phelan, who was previously the commander of the mercenary company in which Paks served, has learned that he is the rightful king of Lyonya, a country where rule is divided between humans and elves. In neighboring Tsaia, where Kieri was formerly a duke, young Prince Mikeli is also preparing to assume his late father's throne. While the two are in similar situations, the differences are striking. Kieri is a seasoned leader, but he needs to learn the customs and the lay of the land—which includes learning what it means to be half-elf, as he has recently learned he is. Mikeli needs to learn the very rudiments of leadership—in an environment that quickly turns out to be much more dangerous than he knew.

That danger is quickly driven home by an assassination attempt that kills two of his senior advisors, before the assassin—the sorcerous Duke Verrakai—is

killed. Mikeli issues an order outlawing the rest of the Verrakai family, except for one member known to be untouched by their sorcery: Dorrin Verrakai, one of Kieri's captains, whom Mikeli calls to assume the dukedom.

Meanwhile, another of Kieri's captains, Jandelir Arcolin, has taken over the mercenary company and travels south to assume a commission. Arcolin has also been given the rule of Kieri's old dukedom, although he has not yet been granted a title. However, he quickly discovers that there is enough turmoil in the south to keep him and his company occupied—including rumors of an ex-pirate turned warlord, who seems to want to expand his territory into the areas Arcolin has been hired to protect. Moon deftly juggles these four variations on the theme of assuming new responsibilities, with different challenges for each of her protagonists. At the same time, she connects their various stories in a way that points to a wider danger than any of them initially realize. The common thread is the apparent survival of supposedly dead members of the Verrakai family, from which Dorrin was banished as a small girl because of her refusal to partake in its bloody and sadistic rituals to nourish her inborn mage powers. Now, to hold her dukedom, she must recover those powers and learn to wield them for good, at the same time resisting the efforts of her kin—now banished in their own right—to recapture their realm. In the process, she discovers an evil imagery that exceeds anything she suspected of them.

At the same time, Mikeli faces evidence that the threat to his kingdom was not ended with the death of the old duke. And in the south, Arcolin's troops find that their problems go well beyond dealing with a few groups of outlaws. Arcolin

finds himself having to think on a strategic scale beyond anything he had to worry about when Kieri was his commander, making the hard decisions. The crisis for him arrives when an apparently simple operation turns out to be a magical trap.

Dorrin must also balance her need to cleanse her dukedom of her predecessors' evil and protect its people with her duty to Mikeli, her king. So toward the end of this book she makes the journey to the capital city, Verella, to swear fealty to him—despite the distrust her name inspires among the citizens familiar with her relatives' careers. At the climactic moment, the full extent of the Verrakai plots starts to become evident, and the ground is laid for the next book in the series.

Moon, who learned about the military as a Marine, handles the combat scenes and the details of life in a mercenary unit convincingly, with a wealth of insights into the nature of command and discipline. But she is equally aware of the daily life of a pre-modern society, with a wealth of detail on how farming people live, the care and handling of horses, and other matters that many fantasy writers—including some of the giants of the field—never get around to looking at. It is hard to think of another fantasy writer who remembers that her characters need to go to the toilet every so often, just to pick one example.

At the same time, her characters cover a satisfyingly broad range. From hereditary royalty to unpolished peasants, Moon has the knack of showing all levels of society. While she tends to tell her story through the eyes of those who have made their marks in the meritocratic structure of a mercenary company, she also has an awareness of the kinds of things a prince knows and takes for granted in the society she has created. And while few historic societies have permitted women to fill the variety of roles she affords them, she makes the premise believable—in fact, after a few pages, one notices it only when she decides to call attention to it, as with Dorrin's selection of clothing to wear to Mikeli's coronation.

While this book contains only the beginning of the new story, Moon's world building and strong characterization are in display throughout, and should be enough reward for any but the most impatient reader. Those already familiar with Moon won't need any further hints from me. Those who haven't tried her yet are in for a treat.

### HESPIRA

By Matthew Hughes  
*Night Shade*, \$24.95 (hc)  
ISBN: 978-1-59780-101-0

The third in Hughes' witty Hengis Hapthorn series, featuring a cerebral detective in a world that is mutating from a dependence on advanced science to domination by magic. The series has aptly been described as a cross between Sherlock Holmes and Jack Vance's "Dying Earth," although that doesn't do Hughes full justice.

The novel begins with Hapthorn winding up a case he considers beneath his abilities. A client wants him to recover a "soul box," a rare collectible stolen from him. The thief has already contacted the owner to arrange ransom; all Hapthorn has to do is make the exchange, taking care to verify that the goods are in fact authentic. But the client is willing to pay exorbitantly, and Hapthorn is sufficiently fond of the better things of life to be swayed by money.

But on the way to meet the thief's go-between, Hapthorn collides in the street with a young woman. He picks himself up, apologizes perfunctorily, and goes off on his assignment. But she has somehow stuck in his memory; seeing her again the next day, he makes a more formal apology. He discovers that she has no memory, she's not even sure of her name. He decides this puzzle is worthy of his talents. But as he takes her home, he learns that his "routine" job of recovering the stolen soul box has become more complicated, and that he is now the target of reprisals by the underworld figure involved.

The original client, it turns out, was not satisfied with recovering the stolen item;

he wants full revenge on the thief—who, perhaps understandably, holds Hapthorn responsible for his sudden troubles. A complicated series of encounters concludes with Hapthorn and the young woman—who has taken the name Hespira, after a character in a popular play—leaving the planet, searching for her world of origin. There, Hapthorn thinks, he can find the answer to her mystery, which he has decided to solve as an exercise of ingenuity.

The journey of discovery takes Hapthorn to several worlds, where he learns more and more about his companion, and eventually comes to the true story behind her loss of memory and the more far-reaching (and unexpectedly dangerous) story behind it. In the process, Hughes takes the reader to a variety of interesting worlds, reminiscent of Vance's picaresque journeys around the galaxy, where he samples strange foods, deals with oddly hierarchical social structures, and arrives at his conclusions by understanding the way those social structures determine the actions of the members of their societies.

Hughes has effectively captured Vance's colorfully ironic way of portraying an exotic society and its inhabitants in a few strokes, as in the elaborate dress code on one of the worlds Hapthorn visits. He also has much of Vance's touch with witty yet highly stylized dialogue. But perhaps the most Vanceian aspect of this series is Hapthorn himself, who may share professions with Sherlock Holmes, but whose overblown ego is more reminiscent of Cugel the Clever, one of Vance's most memorable protagonists.

While this novel, like most mysteries, is effectively self-contained and readable without any previous knowledge of the series, readers who haven't picked up this series previously might want to start with the first book, *Majestrum*, and follow it up with the second, *The Spiral Labyrinth*. Not only do they provide a degree of background that sheds light on various events in this book, they are thoroughly entertaining in their own right.

## ROBOTS HAVE NO TAILS

By Henry Kuttner

Planet Stories, \$12.99 (TP)

ISBN: 978-1-60125-153-4

Here's a handful of comic SF stories from one of the Golden Age masters of short fiction, the late Henry Kuttner. They have in common the lead character, Galloway Gallegher, an inventor who comes up with most of his best ideas while blind drunk.

The stories originally appeared in the pages of John W. Campbell's *Astounding Science Fiction*, the predecessor to *Analog*. As explained in a pithy introduction by F. Paul Wilson, four of them were written in 1942, and the final one in 1948, after Kuttner had served a hitch in the World War II army. Also included is an appreciation of the Gallegher stories by the late C. L. Moore, Kuttner's wife and collaborator on a long string of stories under numerous pseudonyms, most famously "Lewis Padgett." (The intro appeared in a 1973 reprint of the Gallegher stories.)

Like much of even the best SF of the 1940s, the Gallegher stories show their age. For one obvious example, few current writers would make the hero's regularly getting smashed the comic lynchpin of a series of stories. Other unspoken attitudes of these stories would fail the most rudimentary test of political correctness, as well. But anyone who can allow for the passage of six decades is likely to end up enchanted by Kuttner's storytelling virtuosity.

The first story, "Time Locker," is as good an example as any. We meet Gallegher in his lab—the scene in which most of the series takes place. As often happens in the series, he has invented something he isn't sure what the purpose of is—let alone how it works. However, he has a client—in this case, a sharp lawyer named Vanning—who frankly makes his living by finding legal loopholes to exploit. In the past, Gallegher's inventions have been one of his prime means for doing so—for example, a novel weapon that permitted an undetected murder.

Gallegher's newest invention is a box that changes the appearance of things put into it. He doesn't know what it's good for, but he lets Vanning take it. Of course, Vanning has an idea what he might use it for. . . . The story develops as Vanning makes use of the "locker," getting himself out of one kind of trouble only to find himself in some worse fix, leading up to a climax that reveals the true nature of the locker at the same time as it delivers one of Kuttner's patented twists.

Economically told, with the wise-guy dialogue that was the style of the day and effective use of the scientific premise to bring the story to a conclusion, "Time Locker" could be a textbook example of the kind of story Kuttner specialized in—and that defined John Campbell's editorial approach. While comedy wasn't the norm for *Astounding*, the tight story telling and slick prose hit the bull's-eye for readers of the era.

The other stories take a very similar approach, with the significant addition in several stories of Gallegher's grandpa, an entertainingly crotchety foil to the alcoholic inventor. The cast of characters includes an entertainingly wacky robot, several oddball aliens, assorted crooks and con artists, and frequent appearances by the police. Women characters tend to be stereotypes typical of the era, but so is almost everybody else. The fun is in the permutations on Gallegher's tipsy inventions, the discovery of their purpose, and the effect they have on the characters. Nobody is writing stories like this today—which says as much about our era as about Kuttner's.

Fans of the good old stuff already know about Kuttner—and probably already have these stories. But anyone who enjoys a good screwball comedy in the science fiction vein should take a look at this collection. It's the real thing—by one of the finest craftsmen ever to work in our field.

It's good to see a small press like Planet Stories bringing back classic SF; they have several other works by Kuttner and Moore available as well.

## HERE'S LOOKING AT EUCLID

By Alex Bellos

Free Press, \$26.00

ISBN: 978-1-4165-8825-2

The title gives a good sense of the flavor of this wide-ranging and highly entertaining nonfiction overview of the world of numbers, figures, and geometrical shapes by a British journalist. Bellos approaches the subject with a wide curiosity and contagious enthusiasm.

Bellos starts with the concept of number itself, examining the numerical instincts of children, animals, and the non-western cultures that in an earlier era we might have called "primitive." While some of these subjects seem unable to grasp quantities much above five, all apparently have an ability to recognize which of two trees bears the most fruit or whether one's group is outnumbered by a group of potential enemies. Belllos convincingly argues that the latter skill is considerably more important for survival.

Some of the most interesting material touches on cultural differences between the way math functions in different societies. For example, Indian English breaks up numbers above 1,000 differently than we do; "one million" is "ten lakh," while "ten million" is "crore." That leads to a discussion of alternate ways to break up the number system, with binary math probably the best-known alternative. But our division of circles into 360 degrees is a remnant of an ancient competitor to the decimal system, favored by the Babylonians.

For basic arithmetic, the author looks at Japanese abacus users, who can add columns of numbers faster than a calculator. Another non-western mathematical tradition is found in Vedic math, promoted by an Indian sect, which offers advanced algorithms for multiplication and other operations.

Geometry provides Bellos with some of his richest material. The examples range from usual suspects, the Greeks, with an extended look at several ingenious proofs of the Pythagorean theorem. The Euclidean solids and the mathematics of tiling a

# CLASSIFIED MARKETPLACE

Asimov's February 2011

Reach your target audience of highly responsive buyers with Analog/Asimov's combined classified section. Just \$2.95 per word (10 word minimum), \$125 per column inch (2 inch maximum). Contact Robin DiMeglio by phone (203/866-6688 x180).

## BOOKS/PUBLICATIONS

### Follow the deep space Adventures of Carol Alden and Chané Trent



IN "Forever Voyage"  
and  
"Aliens from the Stars"  
by Leonard R. Cook

ISBN: 978-1-4349-8232-1 - \$32.00  
ISBN: 978-1-4349-9275-8 - \$24.00

[www.RoseDogBooks.com](http://www.RoseDogBooks.com)  
or order toll-free: 1-800-834-1803

Check: [www.barrylongyear.net](http://www.barrylongyear.net) Enemy Mine. All books in print.

**WHAT IS THE "STUFF" OF ALL LIFE?** Wenzel,  
Box 14693, Cleveland, OH 44114

**ALIEN COVENANT:** Genesis I. A revealing story.  
[AlienCovenant.com](http://AlienCovenant.com)

**THE THIRD MIGRATION** \$17.95 (US) OhlmsBooks  
Publications POB 125 Walsenburg, CO 81089-0125

**BUYING SCIENCE FICTION** magazines, book  
collections. Will travel for large accumulations.  
Bowman, Box 167, Carmel, IN 46082.

plane also receive their due. But the geometrical explorations stretch to include origami as well as the "golden ratio," also known as "phi," beloved of architects.

More advanced math is found in a chapter on logarithms and a discussion of slide rules, the favorite tool of scientists and technicians needing a quick answer until cheap calculators made them obsolete. Other chapters cover probability and statistics, including a clear exposition of the bell curve and its relevance to activities like buying bread at the bakery.

Recreational math gets its due, as well. Bellos covers the range from the nineteenth-century puzzles of Dudeney and Sam Loyd to Rubik's Cube and Sudoku. Perhaps not surprisingly, there is an entire annual convention dedicated to the master puzzler Martin Gardner.

On Books

## BOOKS/PUBLICATIONS

### SAVE HUMANITY! [TheHumanManifestoBook.com](http://TheHumanManifestoBook.com)

**KINDLE/NOOK/e READER** Find "The Joy Engineers" by W. Strawn Douglas. Only \$2 per download. Good Space Opera.

"**THE WAR OF IMMENSITIES**" by Barry Klemm - out now at Amazon.

## COLLECTOR'S ITEMS

The Estate of Mr. Harold P. Zitzow, a deceased member of MITS-F5 and NESFA, is selling off his rather substantial collection of science fiction books and magazines collected between the 1940's through the 1980's. Items include first editions, autographed books, Fantasy and SF from 1940's through 1980's, and Analog from 1940's through 1980's. To be auctioned live via skype or in person at Arisia 2011 in Boston on the weekend of 15 - 16 January 2011. For more advance info, please contact Liz Zitzow via email [liz@zitzow.com](mailto:liz@zitzow.com) or Skype LizZitzow

## GAMES

**PLAY STARSHIPS!** Free MMORPG designed for intellectuals, not gamers. <http://starships-rpg.com>

## OCULT

**FREE MAGIC SPELL!** Tell us what you need. 909-473-7470 - [www.Ekses.com](http://www.Ekses.com) Ekses, - Box 9315A/A - San Bernardino, CA 92427-9315

## WEBSITES

**DISCOVER THE DYSTOPIAN JOURNAL** [dysjo.com](http://dysjo.com)

Bello's brings his subject alive by keeping a focus on the people who have created math and who have used it creatively through the ages. So we learn not only about the famous Greeks and Renaissance figures like Descartes and Fermat, but nineteenth-century giants like Gauss and Poincaré, and people who collect slide rules and mechanical calculators, or who promote arcane systems of counting or problem solving.

The book is plentifully illustrated, and there are occasional equations and proofs; however, anyone who got through high school math unscathed should be able to enjoy the ride. Highly recommended.

(Note—the book was published in England with the title "Alex's Adventures in Numberland.") O

# SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

The winter holiday weekends (Martin Luther King Day and President's Day) are great times for some indoor SF fun. I'll be at Arisia and Boskone. ChattaCon and ConDor are good bets for Asimovians these months. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con five months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard. —Erwin S. Strauss

## DECEMBER 2010

31-Jan. 2—IlliCon. For info, write: Box 1461, Bastrop TX 78602. Or phone: (973) 242-5999 (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). (Web) [illi-con.com](http://illi-con.com). (E-mail) [Info@illiicon.com](mailto:Info@illiicon.com). Con will be held in: Austin TX (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Hilton. Guests will include: none announced at press time. Celebrating anime and Japanese popular culture in all its forms.

31-Jan. 2—M. E. W. Con. [mewcon.com](http://mewcon.com). Airport Sheraton, Portland OR. Theme: "Manga and Exotic Worlds" ("M. E. W").

## JANUARY 2011

14-16—MarsCon, 131B King Henry Way, Williamsburg VA 23188. [marscon.net](http://marscon.net). Jim & Shannon Butcher, Ursula Vernon. SF/fantasy.

14-17—Arisia, Box 392596, Cambridge MA 02139. [arisia.org](http://arisia.org). Westin Waterfront, Boston MA. Kelly Armstrong, Shaenon Garrity.

21-23—ChattaCon, Box 23908, Chattanooga TN 37422. [chattacon.org](http://chattacon.org). Rusch, Yarbro, Weiskopf, Ruth Thompson, B. & B. Sutton.

29-30—Sci-Fi Expo. [sciflexpo.com/dcc](http://sciflexpo.com/dcc). Dallas Convention Center, Richardson (Dallas) TX. Commercial media SF and toy exposition.

## FEBRUARY 2011

4-6—Cre2c3ndo, 16 Ann's Rd., Cambridge CB5 8TH, UK. [contabible.org.uk/cre2c3ndo](http://contabible.org.uk/cre2c3ndo). Grantham UK. H. Dale. SF/fantasy folksinging.

11-13—EatonCon, c/o Conway, UCR Libraries, Box 5900, Riverside CA 92517. [eaton-collection.ucr.edu](http://eaton-collection.ucr.edu). Mike Davis. Academic con.

18-20—Boskone, Box 809, Framingham MA 01701. (617) 625-2311. [boskone.org](http://boskone.org). Boston MA. Stross, C. Harris, G. Manchess, E. Neely.

18-20—ConDFW, 750 S. Main #14, Keller TX 76248. [condfw.org](http://condfw.org). Richardson (Dallas) TX. Sanderson, McDevitt. SF, fantasy, horror.

18-20—FarPoint, 11708 Troy Ct., Waldorf MD 20681. [farpointcon.com](http://farpointcon.com). Timonium (Baltimore) MD. Okrand, Weinstein. Star Trek, etc.

18-20—TrekTrax, Box 620605, Atlanta GA 30362. [trektrax.org](http://trektrax.org). Holiday Inn Perimeter. Tim Rush, B. Marsh, G. Walsh, DJ B-naut.

18-20—Katsucon, Box 3354, Crofton MD 21114. [katsucon.org](http://katsucon.org). Gaylord National Resort, National Harbor MD (near DC). Anime.

18-20—Eternal Twilight, Box 5773, Milton Keynes MK10 1AS, UK. [massiveevents.co.uk](http://massiveevents.co.uk). Hilton, Birmingham UK. "Twilight" series.

25-27—ConDor, Box 15771, San Diego CA 92175. [condor.org](http://condor.org). Town & Country Resort. A general SF and fantasy convention.

25-27—ConCave, 124 Fairlawn Ave., Lexington KY 40505. [concavky.org](http://concavky.org). Best Western Motor Inn, Bowling Green KY. The Francises.

25-27—MystiCon. [mysticon-va.com](http://mysticon-va.com). Tanglewood Holiday Inn, Roanoke VA. Brinke Stevens, Allen Wold, Paul Dellinger, Mike Allen.

25-27—Furry Fiesta. [furryfiesta.org](http://furryfiesta.org). Austin TX. "All Things Furry." Anthropomorphics.

25-27—Redemption, 61 Chaucer Rd., Farnborough Hants. GU14 8SP, UK. [smofcon.com/redemption](http://smofcon.com/redemption). Britannia Hotel, Coventry UK.

25-27—StellarCon, Box F-4, EUC, UNCG, Greensboro NC 27413. [stellarcon.org](http://stellarcon.org). Best Western, High Point NC. T. McCaffrey, Elmore.

## MARCH 2011

4-6—Wild Wild West Con, Box 13904, Tempe AZ 85284. (623) 237-3663. Tucson AZ. B. & M. Rosenbaum, V. Moore, T. King. Steampunk.

10-13—EPICCon. [epic-conference.com](http://epic-conference.com). Williamsburg VA. "Electronically Published Internet Connection." E-publishing conference.

11-13—FogCon. [fogcon.org](http://fogcon.org). Holiday Inn Golden Gateway, San Francisco CA. Pat Murphy, Jeff Vandermeer. "The City in SF".

11-13—RevelCon, Box 130602, Houston TX 77219. [severalunlimited.com](http://severalunlimited.com). Relax-a-con for adult media fanzine fans.

11-13—ConJour, c/o UHCL Gamers' Guild, 2700 Bay Area Blvd. #198, Houston TX 77058. [conjournet](http://conjournet). Jody Lynn Nye, P. L. Blair.

11-13—CoastCon, Box 1423, Biloxi MS 38533. [coastcon.org](http://coastcon.org). Gulf Coast Coliseum. Jeff Dee, Jack Herman, Jason Fisher. Much gaming.

11-13—AnilidaCon, 1621 Helen #A, Boise ID 83705. [anilida.webs.com](http://anilida.webs.com). Michael Coleman, Tiffany Grant. "East Bound and Down." Anime.

11-13—LunaCon, Box 432, Bronx NY 10465. [lunacon.org](http://lunacon.org). Hilton, Rye Brook NY. L. Schoen, R. Mayo, Eric "in the elevator" Zuckerman.

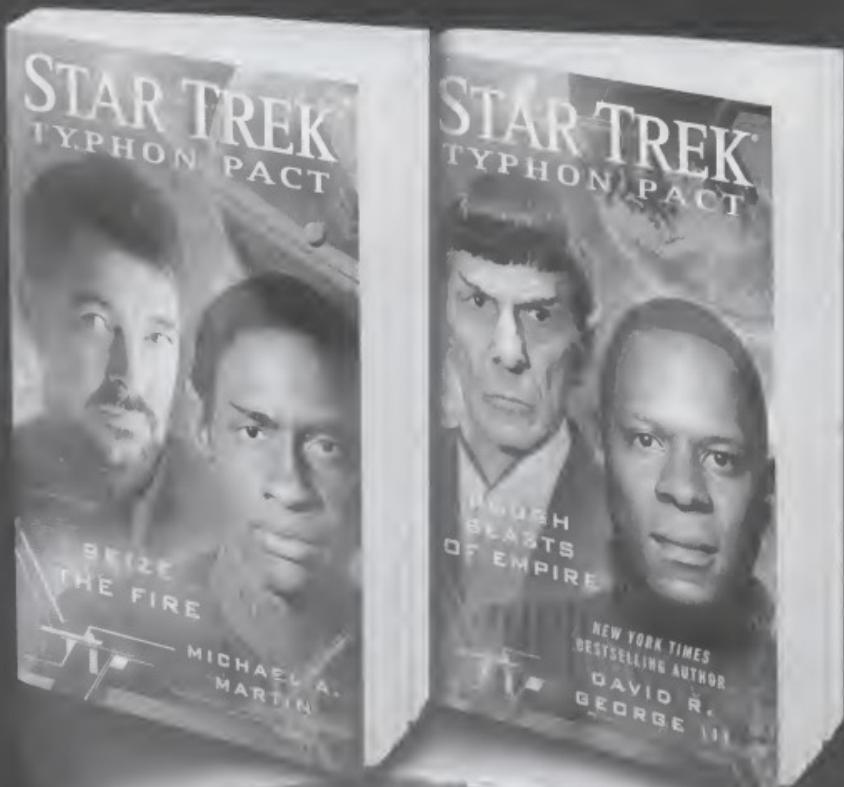
## AUGUST 2011

17-21—RenoVation, Box 13278, Portland OR 97213. [renovationsforg.org](http://renovationsforg.org). Reno NV. Asher, C. N. Brown (I. M.), Powers. WorldCon. \$180.

## AUGUST 2012

30-Sep. 3—ChiCon 7, Box 13, Skokie IL 60076. [chicon.org](http://chicon.org). Chicago IL. Resnick, Morrison, Musgrave, Scalzi. WorldCon. \$155.

# THE EXPLOSIVE TYPHON PACT SERIES CONTINUES!



 POCKET BOOKS  
A Division of Simon & Schuster  
A CBS COMPANY

[www.simonandschuster.com](http://www.simonandschuster.com)

Also available as eBooks.

TM, ®, & © 2010 CBS Studios Inc. STAR TREK and Related Marks and Logos are trademarks of CBS Studios Inc. All Rights Reserved.

THE TONY AWARD®-WINNING COMEDY THRILLER!

ALFRED  
HITCHCOCK'S

# THE 39 STEPS



New York  
**EDITORS' PICK**

"ABSURDLY ENJOYABLE!"  
—Ben Brantley, *The New York Times*

PHOTOS BY KEN BRONER

FOR TICKETS AS LOW AS \$39\*

BRING THIS AD TO THE NEW WORLD STAGES BOX OFFICE  
340 WEST 50TH STREET (BETWEEN 8TH AND 9TH AVES.).

PERFORMANCE SCHEDULE: MON, WED-SAT AT 8PM; WED, SAT & SUN AT 3PM

YOU CAN ALSO VISIT [BROADWAYOFFERS.COM](http://BROADWAYOFFERS.COM) OR CALL 212-947-8844  
AND MENTION CODE TNHHC210.

NEW WORLD STAGES  340 W. 50th St. • [39StepsNY.com](http://39StepsNY.com)

\*\$39 tickets are available for all seats on Wednesday matinees and evenings and Thursday evenings; regular price \$89.50-\$89.50. Tickets with this offer also available for \$55 for select rear mezzanine seats at all performances; regular price \$89.50, and \$65 for select orchestra/front mezzanine seats at all performances; regular price \$89.50. Limit 10 tickets per order. All prices include a \$1.50 facility fee. All sales are final - no refunds or exchanges. Blackout dates may apply. Offer is subject to availability and prior sale. Not valid in combination with any other offers. Offer may be revoked or modified at any time without notice.